

ELIA W. PEATTIE

Dorothy
Murray.
X. mas 1911.

AZALEA

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And then came Azalea.

AZALEA

*The Story of a Girl
in the
Blue Ridge Mountains*

By
ELIA W. PEATTIE

*Illustrations by
Hazel Roberts*



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Chicago

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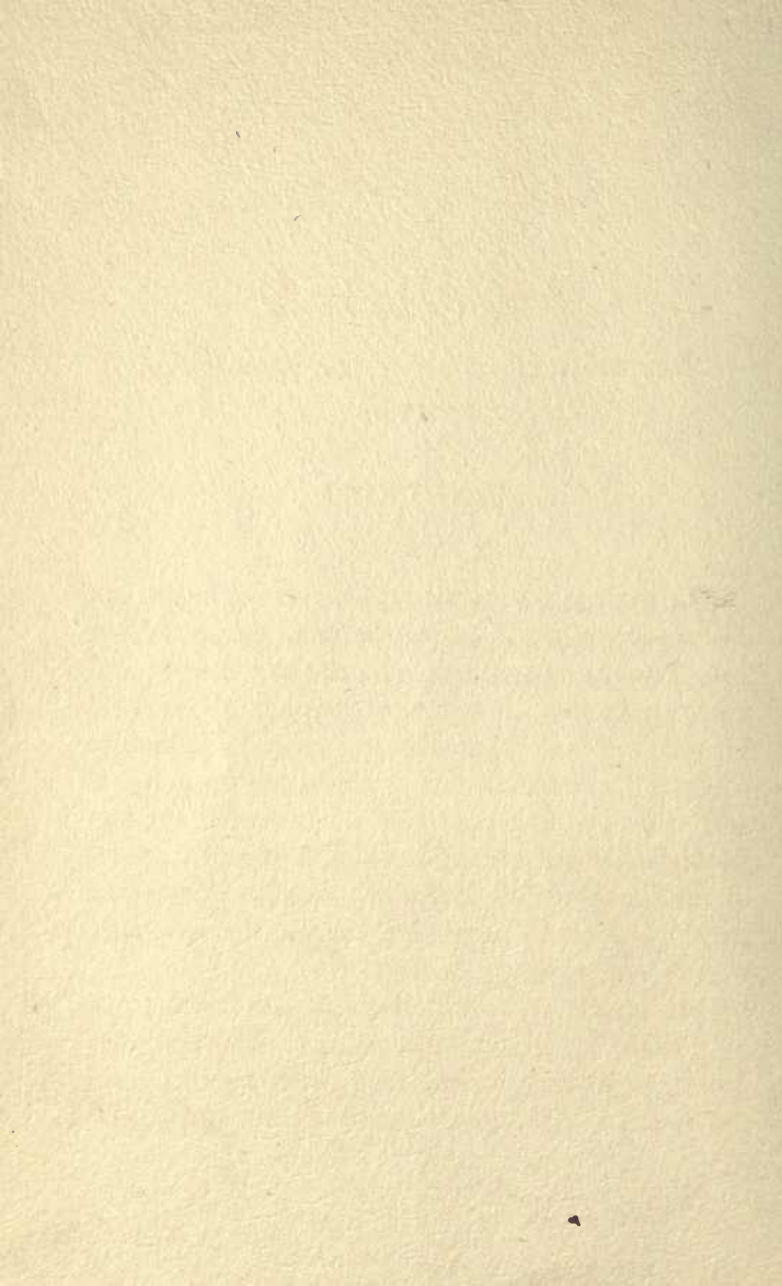
Azalea

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AZALEA

The Story of a Girl of the Blue Ridge Mountains

CHAPTER I

THE MCBIRNEYS

The guinea hens wanted everybody to get up. They said so right under the bedroom window; and the turkey gobbler had the same wish and made it known in his most important manner. Hours before, Mr. Rhode Island Red, the rooster, had expressed his opinion on the subject, and from the first pale hint of dawn till the sun swung up in the clear May sky, a great company of tanagers, robins, martins, meadow larks and their friends had suggested, each in his own way, that it was time to be awake.

But really, it didn't need all of this clamor to get the McBirneys out of bed. Since sunup, Thomas McBirney had been planting cotton on the red clay terraces of his mountain farm; and

Mary McBirney, his wife, had been busied laying her hearth-fire, getting the breakfast and feeding the crowing, cackling, gobbling creatures in the yard. And three times she had thrust her head in at the door of the lean-to to say that if she were a boy she'd get up and see what a pretty day it was.

James Stuart McBirney, otherwise Jim, thought his mother was right about almost everything, but he did differ with her about getting up when a fellow felt like a log and his eyes were as tight as ticks. He had heard her say there was a time for everything, and it seemed to him that the time to sleep was when a fellow was sleepy. Why should sensible people send him to bed when he wasn't sleepy and make him get up when he was?

Besides, something kept nagging away in the back of his mind. It was something that he ought to remember, and couldn't quite, on account of being so sleepy. Or perhaps he didn't want to remember it. At any rate, it wouldn't let him rest in comfort, but pecked away like a woodpecker at a tree. So, in spite of himself, it all came back to him. Ma was out of "fat pine" for kindling, and he must go hunting it.

Well, if he must —

“It don’t seem as you ought to be so long getting into such a few clothes, Jimmy,” a soft voice called. “You’ll be falling into lazy habits if you don’t set a watch on yourself, and you’ll never get shet of them, long as you live.”

“Yessum,” said Jim.

“I can see your pa a-coming ’cross the fields now, and I reckon if you don’t do some hustling he’ll catch you dawdling.”

“Yessum.”

“And, Jimmy!”

“Yessum?”

“I’ve been hearing that Aunt Nan Leiter’s got a making of that blue dye like I’ve been wanting. I reckon after you’ve got the wood you’d better walk over yon and get the bucket of it she promised to give me.”

“Yessum.”

“And, Jimmy, here’s your pa.”

“Yessum.”

“Ain’t you washed yet, son? Shame on you!”

There was a wild splashing of water on the back porch where the wash basin stood, a gasping and panting, and then, with one last “Yessum,” James Stuart McBirney stood in the

door. His turned-up nose, his freckles and his blue eyes all shone as if he had polished them, and his curling, clay-colored hair had drawn itself up in tight ringlets about his head.

He had been hoping that no one would pay any attention to him, and he had his wish. Ma was setting breakfast on the table, steaming hot from the hearth. Pa was standing outside the door shading his eyes with one hand.

"What all are you peering at that a-way, Pa McBirney?" asked his wife. "Is it some one coming over the gap? I heard tell that Sam Bixby and his brothers was about to bring over a string of horses from their place for trading day at Lee. As like as not it's them you're seeing."

"No it ain't, Mary — and it ain't nobody we ever set eyes on before."

"Why, Thomas, how can you tell that, with them just coming over the top of the gap?"

"Well!" said Pa McBirney, "I'll be dumfounded!"

At that Jim and his mother went to the door. They thought it was about time to see what was ailing pa. The three had a way of sharing everything; and it was no wonder that they did so,

for they had only themselves for company. Their cabin, with its two large rooms, its open chamber between, and the lean-to, where Jim slept, sat on a pleasant bench of Mount Tennyson, two thousand feet above the level of the sea. Through their yard ran the road that carried people from over Burlingame way, on the other side of the mountain, down to Lee, the town that lay below them in the purple valley. Sometimes, when the wind was right, they could hear the mill whistles blow at Lee, or the church bells ring; and sometimes they could see the houses there as plain as anything. But usually the little town looked to them as if it were wrapped around in purple veils; and when the rain came, it was swallowed up in white blankness.

The McBirneys thought they lived in a very pleasant and exciting place. Sometimes as many as five or six teams passed their door in one day, and it was seldom indeed that anyone drove by without stopping to pass the time of day. If by chance the McBirneys were sitting down to a meal, the travelers were asked to share it with them, and to water their horses and take a little rest before going on down the mountain. Ma said it was a fine thing for them, being taken

unawares like that. It made them keep the house tidy and themselves ready to see folks. But there were weeks of rain or snow there on the mountain side when almost nobody passed, and when the McBirneys couldn't get to town; and the only sounds to be heard were their own voices and the baying of the four hounds, or the crying of the trees and the crackling of the fire on the hearth.

Not long ago, there had been four of them instead of three. There had been Molly, Jim's little sister, a little girl with hair the color of corn silk, and eyes as dark as "spider lilies." And now she was lying under that tiny heap of earth beneath the Pride of India tree, and Jim's mother was different — quite different — from what she had been before. Her face was sweeter, perhaps, but it looked so that Jim couldn't keep from crying, to himself, of course. And in spite of all they could do, all three of them kept counting Molly in; and now as he ran to the door to see what was going on up there at the gap, he couldn't help thinking how much more fun it would have been if he and Molly had been pushing and scrambling and pretending to see which could get out first, in

the old way. In those old days his mother would have been calling out in the laughing voice she used to have:

"Come along, children, something's going on."

But now father, mother and boy were silent as they stood together looking up where the red road made its way through the forest over the gap.

Pa was the first to speak.

"As near as I can make out," he said slowly, "it's three wagons loaded to the limit, and a lot of people on foot walking alongside."

"Queer doings, ain't it?" murmured ma.

"I allow I'd better run up the road a piece," Jim said, slipping in his words softly, as if he hoped they might go unnoticed, "and see what's doing."

"And I allow," said his father in his most downright voice, "that we-all will just sit down and eat that there good breakfast ma has cooked, and if we keep eating steady we'll be through with the whole business before them folks, whoever they be, gets anywhere nigh."

"Oh, yes!" added ma, "I do wish you'd sit

down and eat things while they're hot and fit for eating."

So they sat down and went at their breakfast as if it were a piece of hard work that must be got out of the way, and then, having finished and slipped what was left to Molly's cat and the four hounds, they got out of doors as quickly as they could.

"The procession is hid around the bend of the road," said ma.

But even as she spoke the words, the "procession" appeared, though it was almost above the McBirney's heads. Both men and animals were moving along very slowly, as if—as pa put it—they were "dead beat."

"It looks," said ma softly, "like a funeral."

"No, it don't nuther, ma," pa answered sharply. "It don't look nothing like a funeral. It looks like a family moving."

"It's a mighty large family then, Thomas."

"Maybe it's folks going down to work in the cotton mill at Lee," Jim suggested. "I heard Rath Rutherford saying there was agents going all through the mountains, asking folks to go down and work."

"Yes, folks with children," snapped Pa Mc-

Birney. "That's the kind they want, and that's the kind that'll go — folks that can get their boys and girls in the mill and make 'em work for 'em. I'd see *myself* lying down and letting my children put food in my mouth!"

"Well, as near as I can make out," said Mary McBirney, "there's only two children in that company. All the rest is grown folks."

The three wagons with their sagging cloth tops, swung around the next curve and turned toward the McBirney cabin. The horses walked with drooping heads; the people dragged their feet. Pa went forward to meet them, and close behind him, trying hard to see and not to be seen, went Jim. Ma McBirney went back and sat on a chair in the doorway, something as a queen might go back and sit on her throne.

"Howdy," said pa.

"Howdy," responded the man who led the first pair of horses.

Pa asked no questions — that would not have been polite according to his idea. He seemed not to look at the tired horses or the still more weary men and women, or at the wagons with their queer load. All he said was:

"There's a good spring of water over yon, if

so be you're wanting water; and this here bench is a good one to rest on before going on down the mountain."

By "bench" he meant, of course, the level bit of land on the mountain side.

Jim knew that his father was simply quivering inside, just as he was himself, to know what those people were doing and what they were carrying in their wagons.

The man looked at pa and nodded.

"We're about tuckered out," he admitted.

"Come far?" asked pa. It hurt his pride to ask the question, but he had to do it. The man looked at pa impatiently.

"Why, we're *always* on the road," he said. "We've got a show here."

A show! Jim felt something running up his spine — something that felt as cold and swift as a lizard. It was really a thrill of excitement, but Jim was afraid it was some sort of sickness. He was not used to the feeling.

The queer procession came to a stop in the McBirney clearing. There were three covered wagons, six thin horses, five men, two women, a boy and a girl. All were walking. The man to whom pa had spoken was pale, fat and tired

looking, and while pa was looking him over in his quiet way the man took off his hat and wiped the moisture from his head.

"We're out of luck," he said. "There's a dying woman in that last wagon — the smartest performer of the bunch. Sing or dance or anything. That's her girl there." He pointed to a slender girl of about Jim's own age, who stood staring off into the valley, though Jim, who had seen that same sort of a look in his mother's face, knew she wasn't really seeing it. She wasn't seeing anything, he decided.

"Sho!" murmured Pa McBirney. "Dying? Are you sure?"

The man thwacked a huge horsefly on his horse's flank.

"Sure," said he.

One of the women asked pa if they might cook their breakfast in the open "rock" fireplace that stood there in the yard.

"Yes, ma'am," said pa quickly. And then he called: "Here, ma, these folks want to cook their breakfast here a-way. And they say there's a mighty sick woman in that tent-wagon yon."

Mary McBirney, whose shyness had kept her

sitting as still as if she were under some spell, got up at once when she heard this, and came forward. She nodded to the men and women without really looking at them, because that was her way with strangers.

"Where's the sick woman, please?" she asked in her soft voice. The girl who had stood looking at the valley turned at this.

"I'll show you, please ma'am," she said, and her voice sounded so tired that it made a lump come in Jim's throat.

Mary McBirney reached down and took the girl's thin brown hand in her own, and the two went on to the wagon, the others watching them. They saw her lean forward and look in the wagon, and then draw back with a startled face.

"Why, it's over!" she called. "Pa! Pa! The poor soul's gone!"

At that the other women ran toward her.

"Why, she was breathing a mile or two back," the one they called Betty said. "I looked in at her and gave her a drink."

"We didn't stay in the wagon because it shut out the air," explained the other. "Zalie here, wanted to stay with her mamma, but we coaxed

her not to, for the poor thing needed all the air she could get."

But the girl was in the wagon now, letting her tears rain on the face of the only one in all the world she ever had called her own.

Betty Bowen began to call to her to come out, but Ma McBirney said: "Just let her cry! Poor little thing—she's just got to cry."

Betty Bowen, and her friend Susan Hetter, began to sniffle a little too, but Mary McBirney looking at them made up her mind that they were not caring very much. They looked too dragged out to care about anything. The dust of the road seemed to have got into their very skin; they looked as if they never had slept in a proper bed or dressed in a proper room; and though Mrs. McBirney did not like them, and could hardly keep from drawing away from them, she felt very sorry for them too.

"Where's the girl's pa?" she asked them.

"We don't know," Betty Bowen said. "Mrs. Knox—that's the dead woman, ma'am—never said anything about him."

"Ain't she got no kin?" asked ma gently.

"None that we know of, ma'am."

Jim stood looking on, his lips pressed hard

together. The girl's mother was dead. *Her mother was dead!* Why, that must be like having the world come to an end, pretty near. If your mother was dead, it didn't matter if if you did belong to a show. But that boy over there, his mother wasn't dead, and yet he acted as "dumb" as a snail. Jim felt that if he, himself, belonged to a show he'd be yelling and jumping and having a whopping time. Every spare minute he'd be practicing up in his part. But these folks acted as if they hardly had life enough to cross the yard; and as for the horses, their heads hung down and their bones stuck out as if they were ready for the buzzards to pick. Jim hated to have that girl crying like that. There was no fun in having a show in your yard when a girl was making such a noise. He tried to forget about it, and walked around looking in the wagons — not the wagon where the girl was, but the others — hoping to find some wild animals in cages. But the only wild animals he saw were made out of wood.

"What's them for?" he asked one of the men, pointing to a wooden zebra and a somewhat faded tiger.

"For the merry-go-round," said the man. "Ever see one?" Jim shook his head, and the man tried to tell him what a merry-go-round was like. Jim was disgusted to think how long he had lived without seeing anything like that.

"I should think," he said to the man, "that this here bench would be a good place to set up your show."

"Oh, fine!" answered the man with a disagreeable laugh. "Then all the jack rabbits and spit cats in the whole neighborhood could come, couldn't they?"

"If you'd set it up, please sir," said Jim, "I'd run all over the mountain in no time, telling the folks about it. There's lots of folks on this mountain—more'n you'd think. They'd pay you money."

But the head man, Sisson, had come up and begun talking about the dead woman.

"I'm just figuring," he said, "whether to take her down to a burying ground in the next town, or to make a grave up here."

Just then Jim's father came up.

"My wife says for you-all to leave that poor woman right up here," he said. "She can be buried out there by that Pride of India tree

beside our little girl, and ma will keep everything looking fine — plant roses, you know, and all that.”

The men didn't seem to care much about roses.

“Thanks,” said Sisson shortly; “that'll be all right.”

“How could it be ‘all right’?” Jim wondered. Now that he had stopped talking about the show he could hear that girl again, and it made him feel very, very queer. The lump came back in his throat and things sort of shook before his eyes. He felt as if something in him was going to burst. And just then some one touched him on the shoulder. He looked up and saw his mother standing there. Her face seemed unusually thin and white and her eyes very large, and there was something so kind — so terribly, heart-breakingly kind — in them, that the something in him did burst, and he found himself crying in his mother's dress.

“I reckon if you feel as sorry as that for the poor girl, you'll like to do something to help.”

Jim nodded, not being able to speak.

“Well, you get a cup of fresh milk and carry it to my bedroom. I'm going to get the poor child in there and coax her to lie down.”

Jim ran to the spring house — tormented all the while with those sobs in his throat — and filled the tall horn cup with milk. When he carried it into his mother's room he found the girl lying on the bed, with Ma McBirney bathing her face and talking to her softly.

"I'm unplaiting your hair, dear," she was saying in a voice so soft that it made Jim think of the pigeons out at the barn, "and I'm going to smooth it. You don't mind, do you?"

"No'm," said the girl brokenly.

"And here's the milk, all nice and cold. If it would please you to drink a little of that!"

She half-lifted the little figure in her arms and held her so while the girl let the cool milk run down her hot throat. Jim noticed that when she lay down again, she took the edge of ma's apron between her fingers and held on to it. Jim understood why. He felt just like doing that himself.

"My little girl that died," said ma, still in that soft, cooing voice, "had yellow hair. Yours is brown, but it's just as pretty."

The girl twisted ma's apron in and out around her fingers; she could think of nothing to say.

"My little Molly's eyes was blue, but yours is just the color of Job's tears."

"Job's tears?" asked the girl. "What are they, please ma'am?"

"You don't know what Job's tears be, honey? Why they're the prettiest little things — sort of beans, they be — and folks dries and strings 'em. Jimmy, you fetch that string from the bureau."

Jim brought the string of softly polished gray beadlike things, and Ma McBirney slipped them softly over the girl's head.

"They just match your eyes, honey. You must wear them to remember me by!"

"Thank you, ma'am. But I'll remember you anyway. You'll be taking care of mamma for me."

"Now here, honey, don't you start crying again! You can do all the crying you want by and by. But now I want you to listen to me. What call have you got to go on with them show people?"

"What else can I do, ma'am? They're all the people I know."

"What do you do in the show?"

"Not much now since my pony died. I used to ride him, ma'am. Now I sell things — peanuts or pictures or songs or anything."

A wave of scarlet went over her face, and

Jim knew she hated being with the show and he wondered why. He would have liked to do that kind of thing very well.

"Tell me — I won't tell no one — be they good to you?" asked ma.

The girl turned her tear-darkened eyes on her.

"Oh, I don't know — I don't know!" she broke out. "Oh, I'm so tired! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

Ma McBirney stooped down and put both arms tight about the girl's shaking form.

"I reckon you'd better stay right here with me," she said. "I'm needing a little girl terrible; and you've lost your ma. You stay right here with me. What do you say to that?"

The girl sat up in bed and looked straight into Ma McBirney's eyes.

"They'd never let me!" she cried.

"Now maybe they would, dear. Would you like it?"

"Oh!" sighed the girl; "Oh, ma'am!"

"What was that name I heard them calling you?"

"Zalie, ma'am. My name is Azalea."

CHAPTER II

NEW FRIENDS

How does news spread on the mountain side? Who carried the word to the little lonely cabins on the wide sides of old Tennyson mountain that there were "things going on" at the McBirney's? Did the buzzards wing the message — or the bald-headed eagle that kept eyrie in the blasted Norway pine above the ginseng lot? Or the martins that made their home in the dried gourds that had been swung for them on the high crosstrees before the McBirney's door?

However that may be, by noon the people began to arrive. Some of them rode their mules or horses; some drove in their carts or wagons; but the greater number came on foot, slipping along the steep paths on the pine needles, or leaping among the rocks, sure of foot, long of limb, and caring nothing for distance.

They were quiet folk with soft voices and with their hearts in the right place. So, though they wanted as much as if they had been chil-

dren, to see the merry-go-round and all the rest of the show, they would not so much as hint at it because of the dead woman who lay all clean and decent on the ironing board laid across two sawhorses, there in the open room between the bedroom and the kitchen, in Mary McBirney's house. Over her a fresh sheet fell. On her bosom lay branches of wild azalea, for her name, too, had been Azalea.

The mistress of the house went about with a strange look on her face. She listened to all that was said to her, but she seemed not really to hear.

"Your ma hadn't ought to be seeing all these folks and going through this experience," Thomas McBirney said to his boy Jim. "It's getting on her mind."

"It's that there girl," Jim whispered. "I heard her asking her if she didn't want to live here with us."

"Sho!" said pa. "That's how the land lays! And what did the little girl say?"

"We might go for some fresh water to the spring," said Jim, "and then we can talk."

So these two good friends set off together, and

Jim told his father all that he had heard his mother and Azalea say to each other.

"There's a good deal of whiskey being passed around on the quiet among them show folks," said pa. "It ain't only the men that's taking it neither. I hold with your ma that we've got a call to see to that girl. What if our Molly had been left like that and she'd fallen to the care of them that was evil in their ways, and been let go to destruction by Christians that might have saved her and wouldn't on account of blind self-seeking?"

On their way back from the spring they saw old Elder Mills coming along on his tall mule. Some one had summoned him to preach the funeral sermon. Jim knew just how he would do, shouting out in his wild singsong till the mountains echoed, and filling the people with fear. He looked like a giant as he rode toward them, his thick, curling iron-gray hair standing out all over his head and his dark eyes burning like fires in their deep sockets.

"Look a-here, Elder," Pa McBirney said; "before we get up where the folks is, I've a request to make of you. You size up them there

show people. You've had experience and you know the good from the bad."

"Judge not that ye be not judged!" roared the elder. "It is the Lord's business to divide the sheep from the goats."

"Maybe, maybe, Elder," said pa soothingly. "But you're something of a hand at it yourself. And I'm asking you to see my wife in private. She's got something on her mind, Elder, and she needs your help."

"All right, brother McBirney," the elder agreed. "Anything I can do for sister McBirney, it gives me pleasure to do, sir, for a better woman I never did know, and I've known a power of good ones in my time."

Half an hour after they had got back to the clearing, Jimmy, who was standing around waiting for a chance to get acquainted with the boy who had come with the show people, heard his father and mother and Elder Mills bidding the show people to come into the kitchen. He knew well enough what they were going to talk about. His pa and ma were going to ask that poor girl of them. The mountain people who had gathered, and who were making themselves at home there in the clearing, seemed to guess

what was in the wind. Jim heard his mother's friend, Mrs. Leiter saying: "It would be the best thing that could come to the child. Mrs. McBirney would be a real mother to her; and like as not the child would put heart into Mrs. McBirney. She ain't never been herself a minute since Molly was took. To my seeing, them show folks ain't the kind to have charge of a child — particularly not a nice little girl like that one."

By and by all of those who had been in the kitchen came out, and Jim could see from the way they looked that they hadn't been able to agree. His mother's face was whiter and more strained than ever; and the light in the old elder's eyes was really fierce. The show people seemed out of humor and they went off by themselves and began cooking their dinner, having nothing to do with the mountain folks. Jim had to help his mother with her dinner then. She was asking the neighbors to share with her, and the women all turned in to pare potatoes and mix-up corn bread and beat up eggs. There was a busy hour or two, and then after all had eaten, a sort of quiet settled on the gathering. They were waiting for the sun to slide a little

further over the mountain, for the day was a very hot one for May. It gave Jim a chance to slip around from place to place, silent as a lizard and saying nothing. He wanted to get acquainted with the show boy, and after what seemed a long time, he found a chance to speak to him.

"If you want to come with me," he said in his drawling, pleasant mountain voice, "I'll show you my mill wheel."

"Did you make it?" demanded the boy. He was a queer, black little creature, who looked as if he had been carved out of a nut. His arms were too long for his body, but they were so strong that he could "chin" himself on the low doorcasing of the shed without any trouble whatever. Jim had already discovered that. He had seen the boy hanging out on a long tree limb and dropping like a cat. All of his ways were quick and sharp, and he had a sly look like that of a half-fed hound. Jim never had seen a boy like this and he felt shy with him. But for all of that, he was determined to know him.

"'Deed and I made the wheel," he said to the boy. "It runs right smart, too."

"How far away is it?"

"Just down by the second waterfall. We don't need to go 'round by the road. We can drop right down the face of the rocks."

"All right," said the boy.

So they slid down the sheer drop of the rocks till they came to a place where the mountain stream widened out into a tiny pool, and then, forced once more into a trough-like gorge, poured on over the face of the rocks. Here Jim had made a mill wheel on which he had worked many a day. The show boy looked at it admiringly.

"It's a right smart wheel," he admitted. He stopped it with one of his dark, slender fingers, and then started it again, and Jim's tongue loosened, and he told him about all the other wheels he had made, and why this was better than any of the others.

After a time they stuck their hot, dusty toes in the pool and sat there watching the world. The sun and shadow raced over the valley below; a hawk wheeled above their heads; little creatures danced over the face of the pool.

"What's your name, please?" asked Jim.

"Hi Kitchell."

"Mine's Jim McBirney."

"I know that already."

"Are your folks with the show?"

"Sisson, he's my uncle. He runs the show."

"Do you do tricks?"

"Yes, lots of 'em. And I do chores — do more chores than tricks."

"Do you get paid?"

"Not regular. I get my board and keep. I wish I could stay home with ma, and get some work to do in town. There's four of us, and pa's dead, so my uncle, he said he'd take me off ma's hands."

"I'd like to go with a show."

"Would you?" cried the other. His nutlike face seemed to grow old, and he looked at Jim from under his long lashes. "Would you like sleeping out in the rain, picking up meals here and there, and going on day after day, no matter how you feel? If the old folks take the notion, that's what happens to a fella. And then the being funny, that's the worst. I hate to be funny just because folks have paid to see me that a-way."

"That girl, is she funny?"

"Funny?" The dark boy puzzled over this quite a while. "I don't know about funny."

She's queer! Her ma was queer too. Not a bit like the other women. She was good to me, and taught me out of books and talked to me about my manners. And she could make the people listen when she sang or danced, you bet!"

"Does that girl like the show?"

"No, I reckon not. It's no place for a nice girl to be. But they'll keep her. The people just clap and clap when she does things, she's so 'cute, someway. Those other women, they're no good. It would make you sick to see them trying to be funny. And they're always wanting everybody to wait on 'em. I tell you I'm tired of 'em, and so's Zalie, I expect. She'll just be a slave to them, that's what she'll be, and she'll never get a good word out of 'em neither. I wisht she could stay here with your ma. If she could, then I'd clear out — run away and get a place in a mill or somewhere. I tell you, I don't like drinking and roaming. It's too much like being a tramp. Good folks like your pa and ma don't think nothing of us, I can see that. And I — I don't like it neither."

He wrinkled up his narrow forehead in a heavy frown, and Jim frowned back as he tried to see things the way the boy was seeing them.

He thought the boy very clever, and he knew that what he said was true about the difference between people like his father and mother, and the people like Sisson and his companions.

His mind seemed to go on sudden little journeys, and to show him pictures of the wandering life Hi described, and of his own safe home life. Then the faces and the language of those men and women with the show helped him to understand. He began to feel very sorry for Hi.

"I know a man — Rath Rutherford his name is — who's going around the mountain getting folks to go down and work in the cotton mills at Lee," he said after a time. "He'd take me if my folks would let me go, and I reckon he'd take you if you wanted."

"I never could get away from my uncle — unless I ran away."

"And hid," suggested Jim.

"There ain't nobody to stand by me."

"Yes there is too! I'll stand by you — sure I will."

"I ran away once and got caught and lam-basted for it."

"You wouldn't get caught if I hid you," declared Jim. "Besides, you and me could fight."

They fell to planning what they would do if they were hidden and the people came to get them, and they had to fight; or what would happen if they came across a wildcat or a rattlesnake. They got very well acquainted, and were almost ready to start off together to "take care of themselves," as Hi put it, when a horn was blown from somewhere far above their heads.

"That's for me," cried Jim. "Come, we must go," and forgetting all about his plan for running away, he began scrambling up the rocks toward home.

He was really astonished to find that the afternoon had passed and that the people were cooking supper within and without the house, and he learned that Elder Mills had preached the funeral sermon for "poor Mis' Knox" and that there was a fresh mound of earth beside Molly's little grave.

A wonderful golden light lay across the higher reaches of the mountains, and below, the valley rested in deep purple shadow. The martins were snug in their hanging gourds in the crosstrees, and Jim could hear them making little sleepy noises. It seemed so sweet there at home that he couldn't bear to think of Hi going

on, and when he heard the boy's uncle swearing at him because he had left some chores undone, Jim hated Sisson. He thought what fun he and Hi could have if they were allowed to prowl about and cook their supper together. Jim knew how to build a fire, and how to put it out. His father had taught him to take care of the woods and to keep them from catching fire. Now he came to think of it, he knew a great many things that he would like to teach Hi. But he had to go in the house to his supper, and he saw Hi being jerked along roughly by the arm and heard the angry words his uncle said to him.

Within the house, Azalea was lying on the settle in his mother's clean kitchen. She looked small and white-faced, and her large eyes, which followed Ma McBirney everywhere, were more than ever like "Job's tears." She came to the table when Ma McBirney called her, but she could eat nothing — only drink a little of the warm milk, and her hand trembled so that she could hardly hold the cup to her lips.

And neither was Ma McBirney eating. Her face was white, too, and her eyes full of trouble. Jim knew very well what the matter was. She couldn't bear to have this nice little girl go away

in the company of "bad folks" — for that was how Mary McBirney would call the show people. Almost nothing was said while they were at the table, but when supper was over Pa McBirney remarked:

"Me and you'll wash up the dishes to-night, Jim."

"Ain't ma well?" Jim asked.

"Ma's well enough, but she's got something better to do," was all the answer he got. Pa began washing the dishes, and Jim wondered why it was that he made such a noise about it. Jim was told to build up more fire, too, which seemed strange, for the room was quite warm enough. But he did as he was told. The door stood open onto the porch-like room, but no one could see in unless he came up on the porch, for the solid wooden window shutters had been closed. The fire set up a great crackling, and that and the rattling of the dishes made it seem as if a great deal was going on there in the room. But, really, not very much was going on, for Ma McBirney and Azalea had slipped out of the back door and had not come back again. Outside, the voices of the men and the stamping

of the horses could be heard, and by and by some one called:

"Hulloa there! Hulloa, I say!"

"Hulloa!" answered Jim's father.

"We're ready to go," called the other voice.

"All right," answered Pa McBirney. "I wish you luck."

One of the show women came up on the porch and looked in the door.

"We'll take that girl off your hands now," she said, "and thank you for your trouble."

"No trouble at all, ma'am," said pa politely. "A pleasure, ma'am."

"If you'll just tell me where she is," Betty Bowen went on, looking into the room and seeing no one there but Jim and his father, "I'll go for her."

"It's my impression," said pa slowly, "that my wife and the girl walked on down the mountain a piece. If you'll follow the road maybe you'll catch up with 'em. Maybe."

"See here!" said Mrs. Bowen angrily. "I want that there girl and I want her quick."

"It don't seem as if we did anything very quick up here," said pa gently. "It's our way to take our time about things."

The woman looked at pa and her face turned red. Then she said some things that Jim wondered at, and after that she went for the men. They came storming back, and Sisson wedged himself in the doorway.

"Where's that girl, McBirney?" he demanded.

"I don't seem to rightly know," said pa, with his slowest drawl.

"Where's your old woman, then?"

"Well, I don't know that, neither."

"Where one is, the other is," cried the woman. "She's stole that girl, that's what she's done."

"She'd have hard work a-stealing her," objected Pa McBirney, "when she don't belong to no one."

"You'll find out whether she belongs to anyone or not," Sisson cried, shaking his fist at pa. "You can't come it over us that way. We told you that you couldn't have the girl and we mean it."

"Well," said pa in his most reasonable voice, "I hain't took the girl."

"Your wife has, and that's the same thing."

And you'll have to give her up or there'll be trouble."

"What my wife does and what I do are two different things," pa went on teasingly. "I'm telling you the truth when I say I don't know where them women folks has gone."

Sisson strode into the room at that, trembling with rage, and as he did so, in at the rear door of the room lounged William Sabin, one of the mountaineers, and behind him Tom Williams and after him Dick Bab. Jim thought he saw other forms looming up in the darkness without.

"See here, sonny," whispered Jim's father to him, "you just kind o' slip out of that there window above the bench till we get this little affair settled one way or t'other." And Jim, seeing that his father meant to be obeyed, jumped on the wooden bench, loosed the catch of the board shutter, and crawled out onto the pile of saplings that was stacked against the outer wall. He could hear his heart beating, and he tried not to think what might happen in the next few minutes. He had heard of quarrels in mountain cabins that ended in a terrible way. He wished in the bottom of his heart that those show people had never come near them, and

that his mother had never seen that girl. He could hear his father's voice going on in its pleasant singsong way.

"These here friends of mine," he was saying, "thought to do a little shooting to-night. We've been put about by some spit cats hollering at night, and we thought to get after 'em. But you mustn't hurry away on that account. There's lots of time — all the time there is — and we'll see you down the mountain a piece if you like."

Jim heard Betty Bowen call:

"Come along, boys. It ain't worth it," and then he saw Sisson and the others backing out of the room. They got on their wagons, grumbling and swearing among themselves, while the mountaineers came out and stood watching them, the fire gleaming through the door upon the guns they had brought to hunt the "spit cats."

"Did I understand you to say that you'd like our company for a piece?" drawled Pa McBirney as the show people swung their lanterns beside their wagons and called to their horses to move on.

"You think you're mighty smart," yelled Sisson. "But you wait! Just you wait!"

"Kidnapper!" sneered one of the women. "And your woman — looked too good to believe, she did."

"There's some mighty sharp turns on the road," said pa politely. "And maybe me and my friends had best see you on the way. We've got some neighbors 'waiting for us a piece on. I'd best whistle for 'em, I reckon."

But if he whistled, it was not heard for the noise as the wagons went rattling down the road. For a long time Jim could hear the sound of the hoofs and the squeak of the breaks and the angry voices of the show people.

Meantime, the mountain men had gone back into the kitchen and lighted their pipes. They seemed to have but little to say to each other, and Jim, peeping in at the door, was startled to see each man lift his gun. But his father roared at them and they dropped them with smiles.

"I've got to know where ma is," cried Jim, running to his father. "There ain't any harm coming to ma, is there?"

"Not as I know of, son. Your ma's a smart woman and a set one. When she wants to do a thing she most generally does it."

"But where is she, dad?"

"That's what I can't pre-cisely say, son. All I know is she didn't mean for to let that purty little girl go off with them wildcats. She's set her heart on keeping her in Molly's place, and we've set our hearts on having her. That's all."

That was quite all. The mountaineers sat so that they faced the two open doors and the one open window. They appeared to be enjoying themselves after their fashion. Jim looked out at the dark mountain side and the dense forest, from which a strange whispering as of a thousand voices seemed to come. He knew that wild creatures lived on that mountain, and that terrible, sudden storms sometimes arose and raged over it. He knew, too, how the trails crossed and recrossed each other, and how unfamiliar they looked in the night. It would be very easy for his mother to lose her way, for she kept to the house much more than most of the women on the mountain. He kept saying to himself over and over: "I hope she's safe; I hope she's safe." And aloud he said:

"While we was about it, I wisht we'd a-taken that there boy. He was a awful smart boy."

"Sho!" said pa. "I wisht we had, too."

CHAPTER III

IN HIDING

"It's only a little way farther now, dear. I'm sure it's only a little way."

"A little way to where, please ma'am?" Azalea gasped the question. She was spent with hard climbing, and her heart pounded in her side. The steep path before her was dark and rough. There was only the stars and a small crescent moon to give them light.

"I wouldn't dare to carry a lantern — not to-night," Ma McBirney had explained. "We'll have to find our way in the dark this time."

It seemed to Azalea that it was hours since they began "finding their way." They had slipped out of the back door of the cabin when the people were at their supper, had crouched and crept along the path past the spring house and taken a trail that ran up to the pine grove. From there on they had been winding this way and that, always climbing and climbing till the pain in the girl's side was almost more than she

could stand. Ma McBirney seemed about ready to drop too. Azalea could hear her breath coming almost in sobs. Yet she pushed on, and when Azalea begged her to rest she would only say: "In a little while, my dear. In just a little while."

It began to thunder far off, and sheets of lightning threw a strange pinkish glow over their path now and then.

"Don't you worry none about that there lightning," Ma McBirney said to the girl whose hand she held so tight in her own that it hurt. "It will swing off around the mountain, like as not. Anyway we'll be there before it comes."

"Where, please ma'am?" asked Azalea again. And again Ma McBirney did not answer, but pressed on along the path.

She seemed now to be walking on the very rim of a great bench, and Azalea couldn't help feeling that if the people were looking for them, they could see them standing out against the sky when the lightning flashed over the mountain. Perhaps Ma McBirney feared the same thing. At any rate, she stooped over almost double as she walked. She could not hold Azalea's hand as they crept along this narrow path, but she

told the little girl to hold tight to her skirt. So they went on in the rising of the wind, their way lightened by the increasing flashes of lightning. Fortunately, though, they were walking on ground that was almost level, and it gave their pounding hearts a chance to quiet a little.

Then, suddenly, Azalea saw looming up before her a great mass of rock.

"Here we are!" cried Mrs. McBirney. She began feeling around in the dark, and then, a great flash of lightning showed something on the rock that was blacker than either the night or the stone.

"Here it is!" she cried. "Here's the way in!" And the girl, still holding onto that motherly skirt, crept after Mary McBirney through an opening in the rock, down three rude stairs, along a dark, damp place and through another narrower opening. Ma McBirney struck a match and lit a little lantern.

"Well," she said. "Here we are!"

Azalea looked about her. Their feet rested on bare earth, and on every side of them arose stone walls. From them hung queer, mouse-like creatures and horrid spiders and long beetles. Two benches of stone ran along the

side, and a sort of fireplace had been made of broken pieces of rock, above which a little crack in the roof served as chimney.

"We ain't the first that has hid here," said Mrs. McBirney looking around. "And likely we won't be the last. No one but mountain folk knows about this place, and they ain't telling. Make yourself to home Azalea, for this is where we're going to stay till them friends of yours is tired of looking for us."

Azalea drew up nearer to the woman and hid her face against her bosom.

"Why, what's the matter, you little poor thing?" cried Mrs. McBirney. "You're not minding a few little bats and spiders, be you? I'll get them out in no time."

"No, no!" almost shrieked the girl. "Don't touch them, please! They'll fall down on us!"

"Why, what's this I hear?" demanded ma. "A girl that's been plumb up against all kinds of trouble, getting scared at a few little beasties! You ain't seeming no ways brave to me."

"But thousands of yellow spiders, ma'am! And hundreds of bats! All above our heads, too. I hate it! I just hate it."

"If it wasn't for the storm, dear, we'd lie on

the ground outside," said Mrs. McBirney. "But there, there! It's come, you see. We've got to stay here."

As she spoke the wild downpour of the rain could be heard, sweeping along over the mountain, and the next instant it was roaring about them. They could feel the spray of it dashing in from the outer chamber and here and there through crevices in the rock above them. They seemed terribly alone there on that mountain top in their resounding cavern, and Ma McBirney was not surprised that the girl who had gone through such fearful experiences that day should throw herself into her arms and weep. Mary McBirney held her close and soothed her with soft patings and caresses. She couldn't make her voice heard above the storm, but she knew there were other things besides words with which she could comfort the poor child. They were both very tired. Their limbs trembled from the long, hard climb and from the dread of the storm, and when Ma McBirney spread her great circular cape on the ground they were glad enough to lie down on it. They covered themselves with it too — even their heads, and

after a little while, with the storm still bellowing without, they fell asleep.

Jim and his father heard the uproar and turned in their beds and shivered. In fact, Jim couldn't stand it in bed alone, but crept into his father's room.

"You reckon ma's hid somewhere out of this?" Jim asked.

"Sure!" cried pa, drawing Jim into bed beside him. "Sure she is. Her and that there girl is as dry as a bone somewhere, sitting laughing at all this fuss of rain." But when Jim had fallen asleep, soothed by these words, Pa McBirney got up and walked the floor until morning. Then he cooked Jim's breakfast and his own, and packed a basket with food.

"We-all will be taking a little stroll," he said. "Just hand me down my rifle, sonny. Maybe we might see something we'd like for dinner on the way."

He went out of the back door, bidding Jim keep close beside him, and looked around for quite a while before starting on the up trail; and then he kept away from the wood trail and took the one that led up the face of the rocks — one which no one but a mountaineer could find

or follow. His footsteps appeared on the freshly-washed earth only as far as the spring. From there on, there was no trace of him and his boy, and anyone who came looking for them would indeed have hard work to follow.

"There was talk of them show folks setting up the merry-go-round and all the rest of the contraptions down there at Lee to-day," said pa. "I only hope they'll do it and not go turning their attention to things that don't concern them."

Once or twice as Jim and his father came out upon some rocky ledge of the mountain the boy peered down into the valley to see if he could catch sight of tents or wagons, but all below them was wrapped in a wonderful lilac mist. And anyway, he had not much time to give to these matters. He was thinking of where his mother would be found, and wondering how it was that his father kept such a sure course. Not an idea of where his mother could be entered the boy's head, but he knew there were secret hiding places on the mountains, of which children were not told, and he was right in thinking that his mother had gone to one of these.

After a long time he said:

"Where you heading for, pa?"

"Well," said pa, "your ma thought best not to tell me where she was going. She wanted me to speak up truthful and say I didn't know her whereabouts. But it wouldn't take many guesses for me to locate her in Conscript Den."

"What's that?" asked Jim, staring at his father with open eyes and mouth.

"Well, that's a place that all the old folks about here knows of very well. It's been used by a good many one time and another, but the first time I know of its being used was when old Colonel Atherton tried to conscript a lot of young men down there in Lee, to force 'em to join the Southern army in 1862. Some of these here men was for the Union and they didn't take to the idea of fighting with the South. Anyway, I don't think they was much interested either way. They just wanted to be left alone to work their little farms and be let mind their own business. But they didn't believe in slavery. It wasn't in 'em to do that. They was liberty loving people, and if anything, a little too independent in their ways for their own good, maybe."

"Think so?" said Jim. He had his own ideas about independence.

"So twenty young men that was conscripted run up here and hid, and slipped down the mountain nights and got food; and they picked berries and stoned rabbits and I don't know what all. But even so they didn't have much and they was almost skin and bone when the searchin' party found them."

"And when they found 'em, what did they do?"

Pa seemed not to have heard and walked on even faster than he had been walking, which was quite unnecessary, for though Jim could run along like a squirrel, he was almost out of breath trying to keep up with his father. Now, however, he made a dash and caught at his father's suspender.

"And what did they do with 'em dad?"

"They took 'em down to Lee, Jim, and stood 'em up in the public square—they twenty young chaps, some of 'em not more than eighteen—and their old neighbors faced up there in double file and shot 'em down."

"What!" cried Jim.

"Had to, boy. *Had to!* Military law. The old colonel made 'em."

"Oh!"

“ But that finished him. He lived down there in that big shut-up place they call The Shoals. You know it. It ain’t been opened in your day, but it’s a grand old house. Well, after the old colonel had made the people do the thing I told you about, the countryside was up and buzzing like a nest of hornets, and old colonel, he had to black his face and put on women’s clothes and hike out. And his wife went back to Alabama where she come from, and nobody heard of the Athertons any more.”

“ And are there any folks living at Lee now that did the shooting? ”

Pa McBirney stopped to get his breath, and he looked about him at the lovely day, at the shining woods and the down-plunging stream. Then he dropped on a convenient rock and motioned Jim to sit beside him.

“ I’m a-going to tell you something, Jim,” he said, “ that I want you to remember. Us mountain folks has got a bad name in some ways. Folks say we’re shiftless — some of us — and revengeful. But do you know what the people down at Lee done after old Colonel Atherton was run out? They got together and they took an oath never, no matter what come, to carry on

the story of that dreadful thing. They said they wouldn't speak of it nor hand it on to their children, nor wage war nor nurse hard feelings. So who done the shooting and who was shot is something I don't know and don't want to know. My father knew, and what he knew turned him old before his time. And I remember hearing about an older brother, and never was I told about his end. So maybe your own uncle was one of them poor martyrs. But it don't matter now. It's all healed up, like the hole the fire burned in that there chestnut. It's healed up in brotherly love, and if you was to go to Lee and ask any questions about that there rumpus, you'd get your trouble for your pains. They'd pretend they didn't know what you was talking about. And the young people, they don't know any more about it than just that it happened, and they've married and intermarried, till them that was forced to be slayers and them that was slain have their names passed on in the same family. And I'm proud of it, Jim, and want you to know it, and to say to folks, when they hold out that we're a quarrelsome people, that we're a forgiving people too."

Jim didn't answer. He sat close beside his

father for a while, listening to the gentle sounds of the forest and the falling water. And then the two got up and went on.

At length, amid a fine grove of chestnuts, Jim beheld the same pile of rocks that had loomed up before the tired eyes of Azalea the night before, and he followed his father around into a cranny of them and saw the same doorway she had seen.

"Mary," called pa softly. "Mary! Be you there!"

For a moment there was no answer, and then, as he called again, a frightened voice replied:

"Is it you, Tom? Have you got a light? My, it's dark here, and we've been sleeping till now."

Jim could hardly keep from whooping with delight, and the next moment he and his father had crept through the first half-open chamber, into the dark inner one, where ma and Azalea sat up on the big coat, rubbing their eyes and blinking at the light from the lantern which ma had blown out as they lay down to rest the night before, and which pa had just relighted.

Jim never forgot the strange look of everything — of the cave with its rough walls, of the

bats and spiders and beetles, of his mother, sitting there on the ground, all bewildered and strange-looking, and of the girl who clung to her and shuddered.

"Get out of here! Get out of here!" called Pa McBirney cheerily. "It's a fine day outside." And he helped his wife and Azalea to their feet and led them outside.

"Best not build a fire," he said. "We'll have to lie low a day or two till them show folks get out of the way. I cooked the bacon before I come, and I brought the coffee in a pail. It was hot when I started, but I reckon it's cold enough now. But here's plenty of biscuit, and a jar of gooseberry jam, and some of them star cookies and some hard-boiled eggs and a few radishes and some cold potatoes—"

"My goodness, Thomas!" cried his wife. "Did you think we had turned into wolves because we was living in a den?"

"Well you see, Mary, this here will have to last you all of to-day and perhaps a part of to-morrow. There's no telling just what *will* happen. I might be penned up down there, with men watching me, and then you'd want a little stock of stuff laid by."

Jim had moved over toward Azalea, and now the two stood side by side staring at the older people. Pa might be penned up, and ma, who was hiding in a den, might go hungry! Did such things really happen? Jim turned and gazed at the girl, and he couldn't help thinking how pretty she was, with her oval face and her great gray eyes and her long braids of brown hair. She looked as if she could run as well as a boy and ride a horse as well, or maybe better. Suddenly an idea came to him.

"Say!" he burst out. "You're glad you're with us, ain't you? You don't wish you'd gone on with them other folks?"

"Glad!" said the girl. "Of course I'm glad. I never want to see them again — never, never!" Her gray eyes turned almost black, and she straightened her thin little figure till, in Jim's words, she was like a ramrod.

"Peter!" thought Jim. "I wouldn't like to get her mad at me." She wouldn't be a good one to tease, Jim made up his mind. Jim saw that his mother was watching the girl, too, and he knew how his mother hated anything like bad temper and he wondered if she would like

Azalea as well when she saw that she could be "peppery." But all she said was:

"Azalea, I know a place where there's a spring of water. Pa's brought us a towel and some soap and a comb. We'll go down to the spring and make ready for breakfast." So the two went off together, and Jim and his father spread the breakfast out on a sort of table-rock.

Then they sat down to their breakfast, and whether it was the strangeness of the night and the wildness of the place and the beauty of the morning, or whether it was fun in its way, being outlaws and in hiding, who can say? But as the meal went on they began to laugh and talk as they seldom did even when there was company; and Azalea couldn't keep from laughing either. There was something hushed and sad about her face, and when she spoke, her voice had a break in it, for her terrible sorrow lay heavily upon her heart. Yet, as she had said to Ma McBirney the night before, she had known for a long time that her mother could not live, and she had thought how, after her mother was gone, she herself must go on, taking the rough treatment the show men had given her, and riding bareback on those poor thin horses, and

doing tricks for people who called out horrible things to her. Now she felt safe, and even there in that wild place, more at home perhaps than she ever had felt before in her life.

After a time Jim and his father went away, but not before they had gone in the cave and killed or driven out every creature in it. They made a sort of broom right on the spot before Azalea's astonished eyes, and brushed the place and cleaned it; and pa pried back a big stone on top and let the sunlight in. And then he asked ma how she was going to put in her time.

"Just sitting still," said ma.

"I never saw you sit still yet, Mary," said pa. "I don't believe you can do it."

"Yes I can, Thomas. Don't you worry. I can sit and sit and I'm going to. It's years since I've had a quiet spell and it looks like this was my time to take it."

"Seeing's believing," said pa. And laughing and telling ma not to worry about anything, he and Jim turned down the trail.

"Let's get nearer the waterfall," said ma to Azalea. So they went to a place where a great flat rock ran out into the mountain stream, and here they sat with the water tossing and leaping

past them and hurling itself over the side of the mountain. Ma lay down and put her hands under her head and looked straight up through the branches of an overhanging beech, into the soft blue sky. And Azalea pillowed her head on her arm and lay there too. A long time passed and neither spoke. It was enough to listen to the voices of the mountain, to watch the sailing of the clouds and the winging of the birds. But after a time ma reached out and touched Azalea gently.

"Little girl," she said, "little daughter!"

"Ma'am?"

"I've been a-thinking and a-thinking, and it seems to me it's a queer world."

"Yes'm, it is," said Azalea as if she too had settled that fact in her mind.

"Some things that seem wrong is right, and some that everybody — or almost everybody — says is right, is really, when you come down to it, plumb wrong."

"I reckon that's so, ma'am."

"Now, me taking you in the way I did — grabbing you away from the folks you'd known and been with — that might look wrong. But it

ain't, Azalea, it aint! You want to know how I know it ain't wrong?"

"If you please, ma'am."

"Well, first of all I reasoned it out. You was better in a house than on the road. You was better living where you could go to school than where you'd slave for people who'd give you no education. You was better with people who'd take you to church and read the Scriptures to you than with people who'd swear and curse and drink and gamble. And most of all, you was better with them that would love and cherish you than with them that would just use you, and perhaps bring you to some harm and turn you off when they got through with you."

"Oh, yes'm! I know, ma'am. I'm thankful —"

"I don't want you bothering to be thankful, Azalea. I just want you to be loving. But I haven't said what I wanted to say. It ain't reason that tells me I've done right. It's something else."

There was a little pause, and then she went on:

"It's something I wouldn't like to speak of to everyone, Azalea. But you see, you're going to

take Molly's place with me, and I'm going to begin right away treating you as if you was her."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Well, now this thing — it's like a little bird singing in my heart. Ever since I was a little girl, times would come when that little bird would begin singing. Maybe 'twould be a pretty day and me down washing clothes at the spring; maybe 'twould be something preacher said in church; maybe 'twould be Jimmy shouting and hollering out in the woods, or his pa coming up the trail and letting out a yell to tell me he was on the way. But when the bird sang best, dear, was when I'd done something that I knew I ought to do and that it was hard to do. Now it was hard for me to take you away from those folks, for I don't like to run counter to no one. I like friends and I hate foes, and I had to make foes of them people. But they wouldn't listen to what was right and reasonable, and I had to do the way I done. But all last night when we was climbing the trail in the dark, and when the storm got us, and when we lay in that filthy den, and most of all this morning when I woke up and found you there beside me, the bird

was singing in my heart. It sings sweeter than any of these here birds round about, though they sing sweet enough, goodness knows. But it's just as if something new was come into the world — it's just as it was the day Jimmy was born and lay on my arm and I knew I had a little son of my own. Why, it's just the way it was the day I found I had a Saviour, and learned that the love of my Heavenly Father was round about me, and that I could walk in it and fear nothing. Did you ever feel like that, Azalea? ”

The girl turned her great eyes on her.

“ No'm, I don't think I ever did.”

“ Well, you will, Azalea, you will! I'm going to tell you all about that. I'm going to tell you every good thing I know. And you must tell me all you know, too, for I'm an unschooled woman, who's worked hard and not seen much. But anyway, even for me, I can see that life has trails that lead up the mountain. Don't you like to be here on the mountain top, child? ”

“ Oh, I do, ma'am. I think it's the most beautiful place I ever did see! ”

“ Well, and I was studying about your poor

ma. Just think, to-day whatever there is to know over beyond life, she's knowing. She was brave, wasn't she, and kind?"

"Yes'm, Oh, yes'm — good to folks and animals and everything."

"And it will be counted to her. It's just got to be. She's happy and safe to-day; but maybe she wouldn't have been happy if she couldn't have known you was safe, too, Azalea."

"Do you think she knows, ma'am?"

"I think she knows! I can't sit here on this mountain top and see them birds winging along and hear the wind blowing and the water singing and have the little bird singing away in my heart and not think she knows. Someway, it's like two and two. When you add them they make four. I can't explain what I mean, but I'm trusting, Azalea, and I'm happy."

Her thin face shone with a beautiful light, and the eyes she turned on Azalea were full of lovely tears. The girl crept a little closer to her on the broad rock. The long day passed in silence, to the humming of bees, to the shifting of shadows, to the call of birds. They watched the sun set and the stars rise. They felt the dew

fall on their hands, and saw the blackness drop like soft veils. Again they crept into their den, this time quite without fear, and slept in each other's arms.

CHAPTER IV

NEW CLOTHES

It was about sundown and Pa McBirney and Jim were sitting on the porch of their cabin, feeling lonesome and deserted, when Dick Bab, a bachelor who had a house about halfway between the McBirney house and the foot of the mountain, came driving up on his yellow mule. He grinned when he saw the two sitting there, silent.

"Listening to the whippoorwills?" he asked teasingly.

"Nope," said Pa McBirney shortly.

"Had your supper?"

"Such as it was."

"Suppose you wouldn't have minded a little set-to with them there show folks, would ye?"

"Well, if they'd come, I reckon we-all wouldn't have run away.

"Well, the neighbors thought I'd better ride up and let you know that there won't be nothing doing. They was all hanging around looking

for a little amusement too. In fact so many of them came down to see what kind of a lay-out them folks had, that the show raked in a good deal of money — more than they've had for a long time, to all appearances. Then Elder Mills, he spoke up and said he reckoned they'd made a pretty good thing out of this community and the best they could do was to be a-moving on. He said so emphatic. And the others spoke up and said they thought so too. So that's the last any of us will see of that outfit. They've packed up bag and baggage, and if they had any idea of coming up here and making trouble for you they concealed it mighty well. So your missus may as well come out of hiding and enjoy the comforts of her own rooftree."

"They didn't show much spirit, did they?" asked pa in rather a disappointed voice.

"Not much. But if they'd showed more you might have been punctured full of holes by this time. I reckon it's better for your health the way it is."

"Like as not; like as not," said pa. "You 'light, Dick, and spend the night. Me and Jim's bunking together, so you can sleep in Jim's bed."

"I reckon you-all are wanting ma," said

Dick. And this time pa showed no resentment.

"I reckon we be," he admitted.

So, the next day, about noon, down the steep trail walked Pa McBirney with a forked stick in his hand. Behind him came ma, who had had enough of "sitting" and was ready to go to work again. After her came Azalea, whose feet seemed fairly to touch the rocks and bound off again, and whose little head turned this way and that with a birdlike way of trying to see and hear all that there was to be seen and heard. Last of all came Jim, his arms full of laurel blossoms.

"Well," said ma, looking in at the door of the cabin, "If this here place don't look like a hurricane'd struck it! Azalea, you and me'll have to straighten things up. We can change our dresses and freshen up afterward."

"Being a girl's hard luck," thought Jim. "Me and pa can sit on the front porch I reckon, while the women folks tidy." But he was mistaken.

"Here you, Jim," called his mother in her most businesslike tones, "bring up fresh water from the spring. Pa, I'd like some more wood, please. Azalea, you can be sweeping out. I'll

get over hot water for the dishes. I thought you promised me, pa, that you'd keep the dishes washed!"

"Didn't I do it then?" said pa despairingly. "I washed and washed and Jim wiped and wiped till we about dropped."

"You drop pretty easy," answered ma. But she was not scolding. Ma didn't waste much time in scolding. There was always a laugh behind her words when she said a thing like that. Jim felt a little cast down. And he wondered if the new girl would think they had to work like that all the time. He looked at her to see how she was taking it, and he found her sweeping with all of her might. True, his mother had to show her how to hold the broom in the right way, and how long to take her strokes, but she seemed to think it was fine to be able to sweep out, and it came over Jim that up to now she probably hadn't had a house to sweep, and no doubt she liked it.

But all the work seemed worth while when, at last, they sat down at the table together. Ma had chopped up some salt pork in beaten eggs, and had baked some potatoes in the ashes, and made biscuit and a custard pie. And pa had

brought in some fresh radishes and mountain honey; so there was a real feast for them.

"This is lots better than a cave," Azalea said shyly. "It's lots better than the road too." She was looking very odd in a dress of ma's, which was worlds too wide for her, and which they had tied in with an old blue ribbon. Her pretty, birdlike little head came up out of all this cotton stuff like the head of a frightened chicken out of its ruffled feathers.

"We've got to get right down to the store, Azalea," said ma briskly, "and buy some stuff to sew up for you. I can't endure to have you looking that a-way."

"Why, ma, couldn't Molly's clothes be fixed up to fit Azalea? There might be some changing to do, but you're so handy you could manage that."

"I ain't got a stitch of Molly's clothes left," said ma rather sharply. "What do you think I'd be doing? Letting them there good things lie idle when they was needed by others? Molly wouldn't have liked me to do a thing like that, would she? I gave them all away."

"Well, they would have come in handy now, ma. Sometimes I think you're too impulsive.

You just go and do whatever comes into your head to do right off quick."

"So I do, Thomas; so I do. Soon as I laid eyes on you I knew you was the man I wanted to live with for the rest of my natural life, and when you asked me to marry you it didn't take me a quarter of a second to say yes. Soon as I saw Jimmy there, I knew he was the baby for me. Of course he really was mine, and I'd 'a' had to put up with him even if I hadn't liked the kind he was; but it turned out he was the kind to suit me. It was just the same with Azalea there. The minute I laid eyes on her, I yearned over her, and I can tell just as well as if it was proved to me, that she's going to be a comfort to all of us. Yes, I'm that way, Thomas, mighty impulsive and quick-acting. Now, I've just made up my mind that to-morrow we'll all go down to Lee together and get what we want for Azalea and show the folks what a united family we be."

"You don't want to go flaunting Azalea in the faces of folks, do you, ma?" pa protested.

"Well, I don't know as I'd use the word 'flaunting,' pa, if I was in your place. The folks will be just crazy to see what she's like,

and after the stand they took, hustling them show people out of the way and all, and maybe saving your life by doing it, I think the least we can do is to let them see that the girl was worth all the trouble they took."

"Like as not; like as not!" agreed pa.

That ma had other things on her mind was very certain. She went poking over chests and drawers, searching for something, and at last she came on some undyed homespun cotton of her own weaving. She sat for several minutes with this on her knees, looking at it. At last she called Azalea to her.

"I've half a mind to use that there blue dye Mis' Leiter brought over, to color this here, so's I can run up a dress for you, Azalea. I can't have you go down to town looking like a scarecrow, and I 'clare to goodness, I'm prejudiced against having you go down in that outgrown dress you had on when I saw you first. Why, your arms and legs stuck out like the turkey legs on a platter. It ain't fitten for you to go that way."

"It does seem like you have to go to an awful lot of trouble for me, ma'am," murmured the

girl. "And anyway, you couldn't get that done for to-morrow."

Ma muttered something to herself which Azalea could not catch, and the next minute Mrs. McBirney was away down to the spring, building a fire, putting over a pot, and showing that she was in for what Jim called "one of her spells."

"When ma has a spell of work," he told Azalea, "nothing in this world can stop her."

It couldn't have been more than an hour later that the good, well-made stuff, dyed a rich, dark blue, was whipping on the line in the wind. An hour after that it was pressed and ready to be cut out; and before Azalea could realize what had happened, ma was fitting the waist of a new dress to her.

"I always had a knack of snipping things out," she told Azalea, "and since I bought that there sewing machine with my egg money, I can run a thing up in no time. As luck will have it, I've got some crocheted edging that will look well on the neck and sleeves."

A minute later she broke out:

"See here, Azalea, you don't want hot, tight sleeves coming down to your wrist, like you was

an old woman! I keep my eyes peeled when I go down to Lee, and I notice them girls at the hotel wears their sleeves about up to their elbows. I don't say you want yours hiked up quite that high, but we'll have them somewheres betwixt and between, shan't we? "

Azalea nodded. She had little to say. She was letting all the comfort of being there soak into her as rain soaks into the thirsty earth.

"And then as to collars!" broke in ma. "I can't bear to see a girl with a nice, round little throat, all choked up in a collar. I'll cut this neck out a little, to give you a chance to crook your neck around like a young owl and look at the world."

And then the machine raced along over the seams and hems, and the scissors snipped at raw edges, and ma's needle flew in and out. It was left to Azalea and Jim to get supper, which they did well enough.

"It'll give you a chance to learn where everything is," said ma. "Jim, you show her the spring house and the dishes and everything."

The little girl had cooked over a camp fire more than once, but she had never before set what Ma McBirney called "a nice table."

However, she soon found out the way that the McBirneys wanted things done, and meantime ma sewed on, faster and faster. Her hair got roughed from sitting in the wind, her hands were nervous and her eyes too bright, but she had set her mind on doing that particular thing and nothing that anyone could say to her would stop her. She was at the buttonholes when the rest of the family crept into bed.

"Don't you do any worrying about me," she bade them. "I'm better satisfied than I ever thought to be again."

So they slept—Azalea on a little 'knock-down' that would have to serve till a place had been properly provided for her—and when morning came, on the chair lay the blue frock with its handmade edging, as simple and charming a little gown as any girl in the country would care to wear. Moreover, some faded ribbons had been dyed, and looked almost like new. And there was clean underclothing—not quite the right size, to be sure—and the old shoes had been polished and made to look fit.

But if Azalea thought that everything was to be done for her, and that she was to do nothing in return, she soon found out that she was wrong.

Probably no such idea occurred to her, for she was born with a loving heart, and she had learned to serve. She was not surprised, therefore, when she found that all of the family got up early and worked hard. There were the animals to feed, the house to tidy, the water to bring, the plants to water, the garden to weed. Nobody hurried, exactly, but ma was not fond of "lazy bones," and she kept everyone going till all was as it should be. She advised pa to drive the calf down to the butcher, and she had a basket of eggs to get ready.

But at last all was done, and pa, with Jim beside him, sat on the front seat of the wagon, and ma and Azalea sat in the back seat, all clean and fine, ready to drive down the mountain. The little calf was tied on behind. The hounds had been shut up, and only the cat saw them off. The chickens and guinea hens and turkeys could be heard away up in the brush, but they concerned themselves very little with the comings and goings of anyone. The martins were flying in and out of the high-swung gourds, but they seemed to care as little as the ground fowl. Neither did the little old house, basking there in the sun, seem to mind. And

the graves there, under the Pride of India trees — they minded not at all.

So by steep and pleasant ways, underneath the chestnuts and the hemlocks, the oaks and the mulberries, the tulip trees and the poplars, the McBirneys, four in number, went winding on down, down the road toward Lee.

They had not been an hour on their way before something curious happened. There was a rushing in the bushes beside the road which startled the horses and made Thomas McBirney take the whip out of its socket to be ready for anything that might arise. And the queer part of it was that the creature that was making the noise, was running along, trying to keep pace with the wagon.

“If it was one of the hounds broken loose, it would set up a cry,” said pa. “And it ain’t leaping and jumping like an animal, nohow.”

Azalea’s heart beat hard. She thought that perhaps it was, after all, a wild animal, and that maybe they would be attacked. She was used to being on the road, but this part of the Blue Ridge was wilder than that through which she usually had traveled. However, there was not much time in which to be frightened, for before

any one could realize what was happening, Jim had leaped over the wagon wheel and plunged into the bushes.

"Hold on there, boy," yelled his father. "You don't know what you'll be running into."

A shout of laughter reached him.

"Well, I'll be lammed!" cried Jim. "I'll be shingled, if it ain't Hi!"

"High!" cried pa. "How high? What high? What you talking about, son?"

"Oh, it's Hi! it's Hi!" Azalea chorused, and in a flash she too was over the wagon wheel and in the brush.

Pa turned an angry face around on his wife.

"Be them two children crazy?" he demanded.

At that moment three children instead of two shot their heads up above the dark green of the wild gooseberry bushes. There was Jim's freckled, grinning phiz, Azalea's long, lovely face, smiling, too, and the dark, odd little face of the show boy, Hi Kitchell.

"Well, what do you think of that?" groaned pa.

"He sneaked, pa," Jim explained at the top

of his voice. "When them show folks lit out, he just sneaked. Wasn't he the 'cute one?"

"Goodness, ma, are we going to start an orphan asylum?" pa asked under his breath.

"Might do worse," answered ma.

But Hi was not an orphan, but a young man out for himself, and after he had got into the wagon with the others and all were rolling once more toward Lee, he made that plain.

"I went straight to Mr. Hitchcock at the mill," said he, "and told him I wanted to go to work. He said he'd take me on next Monday. Well, that was all right, only I didn't have a cent in my pocket, but I someway didn't like to tell him that. So I went down town, looking around, and the funniest thing you ever heard of, happened to me."

"What?" demanded the other four at once.

"Well, there was a gentleman come riding in on horseback, and he had a little dog with him, a terrier. He was an awful cute little dog, and when the man went in the post office, I got to playing with him. The puppy didn't know a trick — not a trick. Just plain ignorant, he was. The man was in the office a long time, so I got to teaching that dog some of the things he ought

to know, and by and by the man come out and he see me, and he said I was giving that there dog the kind of schooling he ought to have."

"Sho!" said pa.

"Then he up and asked me where I lived and whose boy I was, and I told him the whole story."

"That was right," said ma gently. "That was just what you ought to do, Hi."

"And that gentleman said if I wanted I could come up to his house and sleep in the barn, and have my meals at the house till I got my first pay from the mill, all for teaching his dog tricks. So I went up and I've been staying there."

"You don't seem to be there now," broke in pa. "Not so's you could notice it."

"Why," cried the boy, "I had to come and tell you-all, didn't I? I thought you-all would be wanting to know."

"We do; sure we do," ma said, reaching forward to pat the boy on the shoulder. "Pa's just as glad as any one, Hi. Don't you let him fool you, the way he speaks."

"No'em."

"I don't see no especial reason for rejoicing that a poor little boy is going to be shut up in

that mill," growled pa. "Hain't I heard the whistles blowing at five, dark mornings and all, rousting them young uns out of bed? And ain't I seen 'em trudging home after dark come? All the day gone by, and no good to them! No, you don't get no celebration out of me over any child or chick getting in that there mill!"

"Now, please sir," broke in Hi, in a kind of free way he had, "don't you worry about me none. I'm going in that mill, but I ain't going to stay there — not unless I like it mighty well. I'm going to get on, if I can. I want to get back to my ma, or to have my ma and the kids come here. But I'm done with that there show and that Weary Willie way of living. I ain't going to trouble you none, don't you think it. I won't even come up to the house if you don't want me to. But I'm thankful to you for what you've done for Zalie, and for what you done for her poor ma, and it just come natural to tell you how I was getting on."

"What made you run along in them there bushes the way you did?" asked pa. "Why didn't you come out fair and square and holler at us and let us know who you was? Why, you like to scared my horses."

Hi was usually ready with an answer, but now he drooped.

"Can't you speak?" demanded pa.

"Tell us, Hi," said ma gently.

"It was just that I wanted to see you-all riding along, with Zalie setting up there like she'd been born in the family," Hi explained, blushing. "It done me good to think that there she was, with nice people like you, and her everybody's slave a day or two ago. I hadn't ought to have done it, I know. But honest, I've got in some sort of sneaking way, having always to dodge and hide and yarn to get on and have any peace."

Pa turned on Hi almost fiercely.

"See here, you," he said, "don't you do no more hiding, nor sneaking, nor fibbing. We-all are friends to you, understand? You come up to we-all's house like it was your own. Stick in the mill a while. It won't hurt you. Mr. Hitchcock's a good man — good's he *can* be, I reckon. You spend your Sundays with us. You can meet us at church and ride up with us. Ma, what's happening to that there fool calf? Acts like he knowed he was going to be slaughtered,

don't he? Poor little critter! Say, ma, you do the trading to-day — you and Azalea. Me and Hi and Jim will walk over to the mill and have a little talk. I want them overseers to know the boy's got his friends."

It was really pa's way of getting out of facing his curious neighbors at the stores. But ma felt no such timidity. Her heart swelled with pride as Azalea leaped, light as a kitten, from the wagon and turned to help Mrs. McBirney down. Ma nodded right and left to the people gathered to do their Saturday "trading," and she introduced Azalea, in her gentle, singing voice, to the women and girls who came up to meet her.

"This is my girl," she would say. "Azalea McBirney. Come, Azalea, let's go in and see if they have something that'll do for the makings of a dress. How'd you like a green gingham — pale green you know? And that there white barred stuff ain't but fifteen cents a yard. How d'ye do, Mr. Constance? Pretty day, ain't it? Do you reckon you could take these here eggs and let me do a little trading with you? Yes, this is the girl. You can call her my girl, when you're speaking of her. I'd like to get her out-

fitted here at your place if you'd be so kind, Mr. Constance."

Azalea stood facing her new world, so to speak, and on every face she saw welcome.

CHAPTER V

THE SHOALS

"Jim," cried Azalea, "my room's done at last. Come see it, quick!"

"I've looked at that room and looked at it. I don't believe it's any different from what it was yesterday."

"James Stuart McBirney, it is too! Ma's hung a blue curtain over the place where my clothes hang, and she's got a braided rug on the floor and a cheesecloth curtain at the window, and she's covered my stand with blue and white print. The way she's fixed up those cones and pine leaves, you'd never know the looking glass was broke. It's the prettiest room I ever saw. Oh, Jim, do come!"

Jim pretended that he wasn't interested, and stamped up the new stairs his father had built, and along the platform which led to the attic room which had been given Azalea for her own. Although Jim was supposed not to care anything about the room, he had, nevertheless, braided a

hammock of warp such as his mother used on her loom, and this hammock had been swung out on the platform. Azalea could lie there and look straight up the mountain side. Jim had helped, too, with the making of the bedstead and the splint-bottomed chairs and the dresser, and in the bottom of his heart he thought it was just the kind of a room Azalea ought to have — she was so pretty and — well, Jim couldn't quite find the word to describe her — but she reminded him of a pinky-white trillium. Not that he would have said so. He treated her just as if she had been his own sister, and that means that he led her rather a hard life at times. But that didn't seem to bother Azalea at all. She would do anything for him, and she could tease back when she had a mind to, and when he "got her in a corner," as he put it, she laughed her ringing laugh.

"Some girls would get mad to be treated the way Jim treats Azalea," ma used to say. "But she's got the sweetest disposition of anybody I ever saw."

"Not too sweet to hold her own," answered Thomas McBirney. "At first I thought to myself, I'll have to pitch in and take that girl's part,

but after a time I says to myself, I reckon I'll leave them two young uns to take care of their-selves."

They used to buy each other to do things, by promising to tell stories. If Jim wanted Azalea to help him gather firewood, he offered to tell her a story in payment for her help. If Azalea wanted Jim to help her scrub the floor, she promised him a story of things that had happened to her when she was "on the road." One day Jim told Azalea the story his father had told him that day on the mountain, about the old Atherton mansion, and how it had stood vacant for years and years, with the swallows flying in and out its chimneys, and the snakes and squirrels and birds having their way with it.

"There's snakes in the grass and bats in the porches and wild doves in the barn," said Jim. "A boy I know told me about it. He says you can't count the squirrels and the catbirds and the robins and the thrushes. Some think it's haunted, but I don't reckon there's much in that story. I'm not long on ghosts."

"It *might* have a ghost," said Azalea wistfully. "Anyway, I'd like to see it — the house, I mean. Oh, Jimmy, I'd just love to see it!

Let's ask ma if we-all can't go picnicking down there."

Ma was doubtful. She said she'd fooled away altogether too much time lately — that she'd never been so lazy. But at this her whole family laughed so, for they almost never caught her for a moment idle, that she gave in and agreed to go the next Saturday.

"Pa'll be driving to town, and we-all will go along. We can get out at the Old Green Place and cut off across to the Atherton Place and eat our lunch there, and then pa, he can meet us at the Green Place again on the way home.

"The road to town used to run by the Atherton house," pa said. "But it did seem as if it picked up every hill in the whole county, and now that the road ain't been taken care of for a dozen years, it's just a pesky lot of sink holes. Why, it's as much as a horse's life is worth to take it over that there road."

Saturday morning came with the bluest of skies. Little soft white clouds floated over it like happy ships on a sea; and the wind was playful, too, and the sunshine friendly. The four got off very early and rattled down the mountain side in a manner to take the breath

away from anyone who had not perfect confidence in Pa McBirney's driving.

At last the "Old Green Place" was reached, and ma prepared to get out with the children. But pa objected.

"See here, I don't think this is a fair deal, ma," he said. "Me going off all by myself, eating my lunch alone in this tarnation old wagon, and you three picnicking! You come along with me, ma. I'm not fit to do trading by myself. You know you've often said that."

Ma made a face at him, for she knew he had her there, but she really did think it rather dull for pa to drive on alone seven miles to town, and so, after she had made the children promise that they would be careful about this, that and the other thing, and be at the Green Place in the middle of the afternoon, she went on to Lee with pa.

The two children turned their faces down an unknown road, overhung with great chestnuts and lindens, and cut into deep gulleys by the rains. The way looked lonely and beautiful and strange and Azalea felt her heart beating a little faster than usual. She was just going to say to



"She ran out to meet me," he cried.

Jim that they'd probably get lost, when something ran swiftly across their path.

"An adder!" cried Jim. "A gray adder! That's the poisonest snake that lives anywhere here about. Don't you go fooling with snakes like that, Zalie, whatever you do. Why, once I teased a gray adder till he got so mad he bit himself. And in three minutes he was dead."

"Honest?"

"Honest! You say you're sorry for snakes — I like 'em to kill! — but don't you fool none around an adder."

"You didn't try to kill that one."

"Well, if I hadn't been going for a good time, I would. Somehow, when I'm going out for a good time, I don't like to begin by killing something."

Azalea laughed lightly, and the two went on along the shady road. Twice they crossed creeks — amber-colored, rippling streams that sang over the stones. One they jumped across; the other was too wide for that, but they found a narrow swinging bridge a little way upstream.

"Don't it seem strange to think that there used to be people and people going along here,"

mused Azalea, "and now almost no one comes here!"

Jim nodded. He hadn't much time to think about things like that. He was wondering what he would find at the Atherton house.

After a time they came to a sunny piece of road, and along the side a clay bank punctured with little holes.

"Oh, doodle bug holes!" cried Jim. "Come, let's get the doodle bugs out." So the two children got down on their knees and blew into the holes where the bugs lived and called three times:

"Doodle bug, come out of your hole!"

And the doodle bugs came out politely, and ran about this way and that as if looking for the person who had called them.

"I spose we're too large for them to see," said Azalea.

They had been told to keep their lunch until noon, but they felt so hungry — at least Jim did — that they decided to eat it at once. So they got out the cold biscuit spread with honey and the bottle of milk and the cornbread sandwiches with the bacon between and ate it all. Not a scrap did they leave. Then they took a long drink of spring water and started on again.

"It's about ten o'clock," said Azalea. "By noon we'll be hungry again, and by four o'clock we'll be starved to death. Pa and ma will come along and find two heaps of bones at the Old Green Place, and they'll never know it's us, and they'll go up the mountain weeping and gnashing their teeth."

Jim looked at her admiringly.

"I don't see how you think of so many things to say, Zalie. I can't think of things to say."

"Then take me along with you wherever you go, Jimmy."

"All right," said he.

At last they got in sight of the Atherton estate. Jim saw it first.

"Look there! Look there!" he cried. "Did you ever see such hedges?"

They ran through the trees, then along beside the great hedge as far as the gateway.

"Why, the gates are open, ain't they, Jim?"

"Say, they are! Now what do you think of that? Zalie, there's smoke coming out of the kitchen chimney — and the grass is cut. And, look there, a man is painting the house."

"There's folks living there, Jim. Maybe it's ghosts — like I said."

"No it ain't. I smell the paint. And that's old man Hendricks doing that painting. It wouldn't be right to holler to him, would it, Azalea?"

"The folks might hear you. It's queer pa didn't know folks had moved in."

"Well, pa ain't been to town for three weeks, and anyway, he might not come on anybody that would tell him. Lots of rich folks comes to Lee now. They come down there because they think it's pretty. That don't seem much of a reason for coming to a place, does it?"

"Well, I reckon that's why your pa and ma stopped away up on Tennyson mountain, Jim. It ain't no way convenient to anything — just way off by itself. If it wasn't that they stopped on account of prettiness, what was it?"

"Pshaw! Pa wouldn't stop nowhere for prettiness."

"I'll bet he would! I'll just bet he would."

"I guess I know pa better than you do, Zalie. I've known him years, and you've known him weeks."

"It ain't the length of time you know a person that counts, Jim. It's the looking in at their hearts and the understanding of them."

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you? Knowing my pa better than I know him!"

"Oh, Jim, see! A girl!"

Their little pretense at quarreling — for it was only a pretense — was stopped by the appearance of a little girl on the portico of the great house.

She looked quite small to them at first, standing among the great pillars that ran up the front of the house, but as she walked on down the old brick walk toward the gateway, they saw that she was almost as tall as Azalea, and quite a little heavier. She was all russet brown — hair, eyes, frock, stockings and shoes, and in her arms she carried a little silky dog with long ears and wistful, bulging eyes.

"We ought to go away," whispered Azalea. "We've no business to stand staring in at other folks's yards like this. It ain't polite."

But though she said this, she did not move an inch, and as for Jim, he stood with his mouth open, watching that girl dance down the long brick walk between the box hedges.

Suddenly she saw the children and stopped. Her eyes rested on Jim a moment and she seemed to smile at his kind, freckled, jolly phiz. Then

she saw Azalea and the look in her face changed to one of deeper interest. Azalea, standing slender and straight there in her clean blue frock, with her gray eyes shining and her long hair beautifully braided, certainly was good to look at. So the girl came on, not dancing now, but hastening along as if bent on business.

"How do you do?" she said sweetly, blushing a little with shyness.

"I'm very well, thank you," said Azalea. "How are you?"

Jim made a noise in his throat to show that he meant well, but no one could tell what words he was trying to say.

"Do you live near here?" the little girl inquired.

Jim pointed over his shoulder.

"We come from up mountain."

"You're not brother and sister!" exclaimed the girl.

Jim wondered what Azalea would say. He was very proud of her. She seemed to him like a humming bird that had come to live among wrens, and he wondered if she would be ashamed of him? He was a happy boy, who wasted no time in thinking about uncomfortable

things, but now, suddenly it came over him that he was rather a stupid chap, with trousers that were too long for him, and a waist that was too short in the sleeves, and bare feet and a freckled face. Azalea's clothes were new, and anyway, his mother knew much more about dressing girls than she did about dressing boys. And then no matter how he dressed or how he tried he never could look like Azalea!

She was speaking now, and he put aside his thoughts to listen.

"Jim's father and mother took me in," she was saying softly, "and they treat me like I was their own. My mother died just a little while ago, and my father — well, I never saw him at all — and now I say my name is McBirney, just like Jim's. He's James Stuart McBirney. I'm Azalea — they let me be called Azalea McBirney."

It was beautifully done — lovingly done. Her pleasant voice caressed the words, her gratitude put a little dew into her eyes. The other girl stood listening and looking and "Oh!" she said. Then she looked at Jim and smiled and said "Oh," once more. And after that she murmured, "Azalea! How pretty! My name is

Carin Carson, and we've just moved here. I don't know anyone and I'm dreadfully lonesome. Couldn't you come in and play for a little while?"

"Thank you," said Azalea, "I s'pose we could. We really came down here to see this house, but we didn't know anyone was living in it. We thought it would be such fun to see a house that no one had lived in for years and years."

"Did you? Why, so did I. And so did papa and mamma. It's a beautiful old house, isn't it? We find something new about it almost every hour. Why, this morning what do you think we found?"

The children shook their heads.

"A secret staircase! Yes, we did. It runs up from a sitting room in that far wing to a bedroom above. There's no door you can see — only panels that slide in the wainscoting. It's more fun! Wouldn't you like to see it?"

"I'd just love to see it. But your ma — would she like us to come in? I don't believe I'd like to come in unless your ma said we might."

"Well, you *are* particular," laughed Carin. "You must have been very strictly brought up."

I'll go ask my mamma, if you'll wait a minute. Come in and sit on this bench."

And without waiting to see them seated under the wide-branching plane tree, she sped away up the walk. Azalea looked after her rather gloomily. What would this nice girl say if she knew that Azalea had been brought up with a traveling show — a miserable show, with coarse, profane men and women in it? And then she remembered, how, though her mother was one of them, and always seemed to want to stay with them and was frightened if any people from the towns tried to know her, yet her mother had been different from the others. And coarse and mean as the show people had been, they were nevertheless afraid of what she would think of them, in a way; and Azalea knew that no unkind or unlovely word ever had passed her lips. She had been most careful about her daughter's manner and language, and as a matter of fact, Azalea knew how to use much better grammar than she usually employed. She talked carelessly because the people around her did so, and because she didn't want to seem a bit finer than dear Pa and Ma McBirney. Whatever they said, somehow sounded right to her.

In a moment or two Azalea saw Carin coming back with a tall, slender lady. The lady was dressed in white and wore a white scarf that drifted back from her shoulders. Even her shoes and her parasol were white.

"That's the ghost, if there is one, I reckon," whispered Jim. Azalea arose as the lady drew near and bowed politely, and Jim did the same, because he saw Azalea doing it. The lady shook hands with them when Carin had introduced them, and talked with them a little while.

"How fortunate it is," she said in a fluty voice, "that you and papa and I bought this house before Jim and his sister saw it, isn't it? They'd have got it away from us I'm afraid." She laughed lightly and looked down at them with large, warm brown eyes like her daughter's. "Well," she went on, "since we were the lucky ones, Carin, the only thing we can do is to show them our treasures." And she led the way back to the house. Carin gave a little skip.

"Don't you think she's a dear?" she whispered to Azalea. "She's the sweetest mother in the world!"

Azalea had a vision of her own tired, frail little mother in her silly show dresses, smiling and

bowing to the crowds of common people that came to hear them, and she shivered as if a chilly wind had blown over her. Yet her mother might have looked as beautiful as this lady, she thought, if she could have walked about a lovely garden with a scarf like a cobweb floating from her shoulders.

They were taken into the wide hall which ran straight through the house and showed a garden in the rear, where a fountain played; and through the long drawing room, where as yet there were only piles of heaped-up furniture, then into a gay little room Mrs. Carson called the morning room, where bright birds were pictured on the curtains and the chair backs; and then into the sitting room in the far wing, where servants were putting hundreds of books on the shelves.

“Let me show them, mother!” cried Carin, and she ran forward to a piece of the high paneling which was not occupied by book shelves, and pushed a little spring, and whish! back into the casement flew the door.

“Look up! Look!” said Carin, dancing about in her delight. Azalea ran forward and looked up the dark narrow stairs.

"Who do you see coming down?" asked Mrs. Carson.

"A tall old man, with stooped shoulders and a dreadful frown," said Azalea.

At that, Jim looked up.

"Why, Zalie," he said, "I don't see anyone!" Azalea was going to laugh, but she saw that Carin and Mrs. Carson didn't laugh.

"It's only our nonsense, Jim," the lady said smilingly. "There isn't one of course."

She looked at her two visitors for a moment. Jim was inquisitive. He wanted to know all there was to know. He was out gunning, so to speak, for facts. Azalea was wandering along hoping to meet with fancies. She was the one with the imagination.

"I don't know which I like best," thought Mrs. Carson. "But I'm sure they make a good team." Aloud she said: "What do you think of lunch in the garden? Everyone in the house save us is as busy as busy as can be. Shall we get our own lunch?"

So, hardly believing that it could all be true, Jim and his sister went with Mrs. Carson and Carin into the great cool pantry and helped spread the thin slices of bread, and to cut the

cheese and dish the honey and slice the cold chicken. And then they sat where the cucumber oleanders shed their fragrance, and the sound of the fountain whispered in their ears, and ate and talked and laughed together.

Afterward they explored the garden and the barn — at least the children did — and then the hour came for the McBirneys to go.

“Could I see your mother?” asked Azalea. “Do you think she’s resting?”

“I’ll go see,” Carin said. Mrs. Carson came back with her and smiled upon the children.

“Happy days, happy days!” she sighed. “It’s nice to be as young as you are.”

“We certainly have been happy, ma’am,” Azalea said. “You’ve been so good to us, and we’re just strangers. I don’t see how you could be so good when you didn’t know us or anything.”

“My dear,” said the lady, “A few years ago something happened to me which made me decide to be happy whenever I had the chance, and to make other people happy in the same way. I saw you and wanted to know you. Carin wanted to know you. You wished to see our home. It was the kind of a home you would have picked

out for your own if you could. It was the merest accident that I had it and you didn't. Very well, I've shared it with you. See? Come again, come again! We keep open doors at The Shoals."

Azalea got away somehow, her heart dancing with gratitude. Jim followed. They were late, and they ran along the uneven, shady road. Pa and Ma McBirney were already at the "Old Green Place," a little tired of waiting but very good-natured notwithstanding. So, since everything was going well it seemed a little odd that Azalea should put her head down in Ma McBirney's lap and softly weep.

Never did Alazea love this dear woman more than when she found that she was to be allowed to weep if she liked without being asked why. Mary McBirney stroked the soft hair and said nothing — was most careful in fact, not to call the attention of Jim and his father to her outburst. At last Azalea lifted her face, tear-stained and smiling.

"I've been so happy," she whispered. "When we get home I'll tell you all about it. Everything seems different."

Jim had been rattling on to his father on the

front seat, and Mrs. McBirney, who had managed to catch a part of what he was saying, had some idea of why the world seemed different. She, herself, thought that Azalea, the daughter of the wandering show woman, was really meant for a beautiful life like that of the Carson's, rather than a life of work and poverty and hardship like her own.

"But I'll give her what I can," she thought.
"I'll give her love."

CHAPTER VI

GROWING PAINS

That night Mary McBirney carried the candle up to the loft for Azalea and sat beside her while she undressed.

"I reckon you feel a little upset, honey," she said in her gentle, motherly way. "You saw them grand folks with their fine ways, and beautiful home, and nice clothes, and it made you feel you wasn't nobody. I know just how you feel. I was born up Blue River Valley way, and till I was fifteen I didn't see nobody but folks of the same kind as mine. Then two ladies came driving through our country, writing up us mountain people, and telling all about the mountains and what trees and flowers was on 'em, and they asked me to go along to do the cooking for them, and shake down their beds for 'em and all that. So I went, and set up on the front seat of the carriage with the driver, and I heard all they had to say, and watched their way of doing things. Well, it set me back some. I found out

that what I knew wouldn't fill the thimble point of their knowing. They was wearing rough clothing for camping, but if I tried all my days I couldn't make clothes look like that. I wouldn't know how to buy them if I had the money. Me, I just did things anyhow, to get them done, but they had a right way for everything and rules about how to act in every kind of case. At first I tried to catch on to their ways, but at last I saw it was going to be too much for me, and I just settled down to be content in my own way with my own kind of folks. But my pillow was wet many a night, honey. Growing pains, they were. You're having them now."

"And so is Jim, I s'pose," sighed the girl. "I s'pose he feels the same way — all mixed up."

"He ain't feeling nothing like you be," declared ma. "Jim's a boy, and matter of fact. He's a leetle older than you, really, but not near so old in his feelings. Jim saw what there was to see on top — saw what was floating along the surface. But you think and feel in a different way, and your feelings go down deeper. Now mind, I don't say that I think they always will. Jim's tender and he's true, and when men are tender and true they feel deeper than any woman

can feel. At least no woman can get ahead of them that way. I'm waiting for Jim to get a little older before his feelings set, so to speak. Just now he ain't got any more opinions than a nice soft bunny."

"Oh, ma," cried Azalea, "you don't really know him if you think that! Jim does a lot of thinking, and he's as tender-hearted as he can be."

Ma McBirney blew out the candle and smiled to herself in the dark. She loved to hear her Jimmy praised. But he had seemed a little dull and backward in comparison with the girl, and in her silent jealousy for her boy, she had spoken of him in a fault-finding way. It healed her to hear him praised in that warm manner.

"We're lucky ones, Thomas," she said when she had gone downstairs, "to have two children like them. They're pure gold."

"So they be," said pa. "So they be!"

And then he and ma walked silently out to the Pride of India tree beneath which their Molly and Azalea's mother were buried, and stood there a few minutes before they closed up the house for the night.

The next week when pa went to town, he brought back great news.

"Them there Carsons down in the Atherton house," he said to his family at supper, "are up to the greatest things you ever heard of. They're making all the mountain folks welcome, and buying up their pieced bedquilts and their hand-weaving, and their baskets and chairs. Why, Mr. Carson, he and me was made acquainted by the grocer, and he asked me if I done anything in the way of hand work. Well, I allowed I made pretty good chairs, and he told me to bring down half a dozen big roomy ones for his porch. He said like as not some of his friends would want some too. Then I told him about your weaving and he said he'd like to drive his wife up to see it. Said he'd like to look over our place. I'd been telling him how sightly it was. They've got everybody humping. Cannaby's making roads for him, and Fletcher's making shoes, and he's buying up fine hens — wants some of my guinea hens — and he's looking for a good cow, and I don't know what all. I ain't seen things so lively down street since I can recollect."

"If he comes up, he'll bring Miss Carin,

won't he? Oh, ma, do you think he'll bring Miss Carin?"

"Sure he will," said Mary McBirney. "She wouldn't let him come up here without her if she had her way, after all the liking she took to you."

"And to Jim, ma. She liked Jim just as much as she did me."

"Go along," said Jim, "she wouldn't 'a' looked at me if you hadn't been there, Zalie."

"She would too! What makes him act like that, ma?"

"He's naturally modest and retiring," said pa with a twinkle in his eye. "He takes after me."

"They must be awful good folks, them Carsons," said ma admiringly.

"They've got plenty of goodness, but they ain't blessed with any too much sense," remarked pa.

"What makes you think that, Thomas?"

"Well, the folks was telling me how this Mr. Carson goes riding all over the mountain alone. He don't seem to have no idea that he might stumble on something it would be best for him not to see. Any morning, if he gets up early, he

can see a dozen streams of smoke rising from the mountain side, and if he's got the sense of a mule, he'll know that there's a moonshine still at every one of them colyumns of smoke. Any baby'd know that. The sensible thing for folks to do in this part of the country, is to keep to the beaten track, and not to go too far on that. Them moonshiners is dreadful sensitive. They think folks is prying into their affairs when they ain't no such intention and once they get that idea they make it mighty uncomfortable for whoever has come under suspicion."

"You ought to warn him, pa. He can't know our ways."

"They ain't my ways, I tell you that! Moonshining ways ain't my ways," declared pa.

Azalea didn't entirely understand about these "moonshiners" as they were called, though she had heard about them all her life. Pa explained to her that they were people who made crude whiskey from the corn and sold it without paying the government the tax which it had placed upon liquor, and that because they did not pay this tax they had to make their whiskey in secret. The officers of the government were always on the outlook for them, and so these people had

to keep on an outlook for the officers, and they were liable to think that everyone who got anywhere near them was spying on them.

"On the face of it," said pa meditatively, "I suppose it don't seem so bad — making something you know how to make and selling it to them as wants to buy, without saying by-your-leave to no one. But the country can't be run without money, and one of the ways it takes to raise money is by placing a big tax on liquor. As for me, I wouldn't care if 'twas ten times bigger than it is. It's done a heap more harm than good, to my mind, although I'm not so pig-headed as to deny that it can do good sometimes. But it ain't just the making and selling of the whiskey in secret that hurts these moonshiners. It's the setting themselves against the law, and getting to be outlaws, and keeping hate and fear and suspicion in their hearts early and late, and bringing up their children to the same ideas. It's a wicked thing, Azalea, and it brings trouble beyond measuring to the folks down here."

"And yet," said ma, "I know some moonshiners who are very pleasant people."

"Sure!" cried pa. "They'll do anything for their friends and they'll stand by each other

through thick and thin. And you're not to think that they're all ignorant and unlearned. Some of them is smart as whips, and send their children away to school and take books out of the public library there at Lee. I could mention some not an hour's ride from this very spot who do it. And I've known whole communities of moonshiners to be converted and join the church and turn from their evil ways, and they make pretty noisy church members, most of them. It seems like they take their religion hard. I've heard them at camp meeting and they was doing more hollering and shouting than all the rest put together. I reckon they thought the Lord had a good deal to forgive."

"Why, pa!" murmured Mrs. McBirney. "How you talk! And before the children! But now you can see, Azalea, why I don't want you wandering around alone on these mountains. You're likely to run into one of them stills while they're in operation, and while they wouldn't do any harm to a girl, they'd think it up to them to give her a dreadful scare. So you stick to the places you know about. You hear?"

"Yessum."

Azalea thought about the moonshiners a good

deal after this. It seemed to her to be dreadful not to be able to live in a free and open way. She could think of nothing that she would hate worse than having to hide, or to be forever on the watch. In the old days when she had traveled with the show she often had been made to feel that people did not want them around. They had, in a way, been under suspicion, and houses were always locked up more carefully when the show people came to town. Not that there was any need of it, so far as she knew. They had not been thieves; but they had been careless and dirty and miserable enough. It was very different from the life she was leading now. Pa and Ma McBirney could look anybody in the face. They would go out from their door, smiling, to meet the people driving by, and would always beg them to stop and have some spring water or fresh milk; and Jim and she were proud to be with them. Everyone seemed to like the McBirneys. Everyone thought they were good — and Azalea knew they were and that it was an honor for her to bear their name.

At the same time, Azalea realized that she was somehow different from them. For example, ma had spoken of giving up trying to be like

those ladies she traveled with. When she found they had so many rules and ways which she couldn't understand, she made up her mind not to worry about all of these strange matters, but to be contented with her own people and their manner of doing things. Now Azalea felt sure that she, for her part, would not have given up.

"I'd have learned their way of doing things," she said to herself. "I'd have found out about those things that they knew and I didn't, 'deed I would. I just hate to have folks get ahead of me! I'm like old Nannie; I want to keep up with everything on the road. And Jim does too, I reckon. I hope pa and ma will let us go to school when it opens, though Jim says it's a dreadful long walk. But I don't mind walking. Mercy, if anybody knows how to walk, I'm the person!"

It was the very next Sunday that Azalea found out what the moonshiners would do even to a person they were not much afraid of. She had gone to the spring house early, to get the cream and butter, when she saw some one dashing out of the bushes. It was a boy, but it took her several moments to find out that it was some one she knew. When she made out that it was

her old friend Hi Ketchéll with that white face and those frightened eyes, she was amazed.

"Whatever ails you, Hi?" she called, running toward him. "You haven't been bitten by a rattler have you?"

But Hi was too out of breath to answer at once, and he dropped down on the seat by the spring house while Azalea brought him a glass of water.

"It was men!" he managed to gasp at last. "It was men, Zalie. They was going to kill me, and I hadn't done no manner of harm to them. I was walking up the trail — for I thought I might as well be here in time for breakfast, since Mrs. McBirney had asked me to spend the day — and I thought I'd take some short cuts. So plunk I went up the mountain, and the first thing I knowed, I had run plumb into a whole gang of men working like good fellows with a fire and coils of pipe and kettles, and I don't know what all. Soon as my eyes lighted on to them I guessed it was a moonshiners' still, and I tried to crawl away without anybody's seeing me. But, sir, one fellow, he caught sight of me, and he grabbed his gun and started after me, and two others grabbed their guns, and I just

hiked up the mountain and they after me. But laws, I couldn't run with them fellows. Seems as if their legs was about three yards long. They got me in no time and they stood me up against a tree and backed off and pointed their guns at me and told me if I didn't promise I'd never, never tell on them, they'd put so many holes into me my mother'd think I was a sieve. Well, I give my word I wouldn't tell where their place was, nor anything about them, and they let me go, but they said if I wasn't out of sight in two minutes they'd fire anyway. And they run after me a ways just to give me a start."

He grinned up at Azalea, as if half ashamed of the whole affair, and she laughed back at him, reassuringly, though her face was rather white too.

"But you've told me, Hi," she said. "And you've broken your promise."

Hi frowned.

"Zalie," he said sternly, "Don't I tell you everything? Besides, you don't know where their place is, and I ain't going to tell, partly because I don't want to, and partly because I don't know. I don't see how I ever found the way here at all, I was so mixed up. And what's

more, I don't attach no importance to a promise that's wrung out of a fellow like that. Of course I promised! I had to. But that's a very different thing from a promise you give on your honor. I don't want you to think I'd break a promise, Zalie — not a fair and square promise."

"Oh, Hi! don't I know you wouldn't? I'm only teasing. I won't say a word about it to anyone; but it shows ma was right. She said I must keep to the road and not go prowling off by myself. How are you getting on, Hi?"

"Oh, first-rate. I don't like being shut up in the mill all day any too well, of course. You see, it comes hard on a fellow who's been used to being out of doors early and late. But there's little children there, Zalie — little, little children. It makes me feel dreadful to see them. I tell you, I'm not meaning to stay there long. I'm looking about all the time for some kind of an outdoor job. Mr. Carson, he's got me to pulling weeds out of his brick walk. I have about half an hour after work and before it gets dark and that lets me do quite a lot at the Carsons; and then they give me my supper there."

"But that makes such long hours, Hi," Azalea protested. "You'll wear yourself out."

"No I won't, Zalie. I'm made of cast iron. And then the working out of doors sort of rests me. It gives me an appetite too. And I tell you what, I want to please Mr. Carson. He's a fine man to work for. He seems to kind of notice me, and I think maybe I can get took on there at his place."

"The Carsons are like that. They notice everybody. They even noticed Jim and me."

"Why, you goose, anybody would notice you!" cried Hi. "Don't you know that yet? Jim's a mighty pleasant-looking boy too. Looks as if he knew which end he was standing on, all right."

But at that moment Ma McBirney's voice, with a tone of impatience in it, came out to them.

"Azalea, child, where in the name of goodness have you gone? Don't you know we're waiting breakfast? Hurry up, child, do. Pa has just made up his mind to take us all to the Singing."

"The Singing? What's the Singing?" asked Azalea, as she and Hi ran toward the house with the butter and the milk in their hands.

"Don't tell me you don't know what a sing-

ing is," said pa. Hi and Azalea shook their heads.

"Well, then," said pa, "nobody is to tell you, and before long you'll see for yourselves. Hustle now, we ought to have been on the road by this time. It slipped my mind this was the date, till the Groggings went by and reminded me."

"My goodness," sighed ma, "I'm glad our best dresses are fresh ironed, Azalea. Here, everybody pay strict attention to eating! We've got to get off if we're to take any part in the doings!"

CHAPTER VII

THE SINGING

"Say," said Hi as he and Jim washed their faces and gave an extra fine brushing to their hair, "ain't I the lucky one though, going off like this with you-all? I don't see how it comes your pa and ma are so good to me and Zalie."

"Comes natural to them," growled Jim, much embarrassed by this praise of the persons he loved best. "They're even good to me."

"Get out!" cried Hi, sprinkling some water on Jim's clean waist.

"Here you, if you think so much of my ma, what are you spoiling all her work for?" shouted Jim. "You need a little learning, that's what you need!"

The next moment the two boys had gripped and were rolling on the floor together. Mrs. McBirney heard the rumpus and came running, but her gentle voice could barely make itself heard as the two boys threshed around on the

floor, and it took Thomas McBirney's strong hand and firm voice to bring them to their feet again, half laughing and half angry, and red as turkey cocks.

"A likely way to begin the Sabbath," pa reproved them. "Brush yourselves off now, and get calmed down before we start. It will be a pleasant sight, seeing you two standing up hymn-singing, after the way you've been carrying on."

However, when fifteen minutes later the party started off down the mountain side, the two boys looked like perfect models. Hi was allowed to sit on the front seat with pa; Jim, Azalea and Mrs. McBirney sat behind. Ma wore her one white dress and her black bonnet with the green ribbon, and Azalea had on her new white dress with the cat stitching in blue; and her white hat with its blue ribbons was the very hat of hats for her to wear. Pa McBirney felt secretly proud of his family, but it wouldn't have been his way to give them a notion of that. However, ma, who knew most of the things that pa thought, could tell that he was well pleased. He showed Hi all the landmarks — the little broken branches that looked like two birds sit-

ting side by side on a gaunt live-oak limb that reached over their path; the "cannon," a huge prone log which had once fallen across the road, and had been sawed in such a manner that it looked like a gigantic gun ready to be fired at them; the "haunted house" where a family of white-faced, queer folk lived, who ran in and drew down the shades when they saw anyone coming; and the "spy glass," a curious opening, through miles of woodland, through which a person could look down the mountain side and away across the valley, where the cotton and the corn grew in their rich fields and the silver streams wound in and out.

"I tell you, we that live in a place like this are likely to forget our blessings," remarked Mr. McBirney. "Every way you turn, it's sightly and a comfort to the eye. If I had to live where it was all dirt and noise and folks crowding on top of one another, seems like I'd want to die."

"Wouldn't you, just!" murmured ma sympathetically.

"But here we are, off pleasuring, on as pretty a day as God ever dropped down on his footstool."

Ma agreed with him, and began to "tune up," as pa put it, humming under her breath. She had her old song book in her hand — the book with the square notes, such as the mountain people always used at their "singings." She explained to Azalea that the shape of the notes indicated their names. For example, no matter what key "do" might be in, it could be told for "do" by its shape. "Sol" would have another shape; "re" yet another. In this manner no one need be confused by four or even six sharps.

"And it's a custom with us, Azalea," she explained, "to sing the tune through by note first. After we've done that, and everybody has got the tune fixed in his head, so to speak, we go through and sing the words."

"You'll have to tell Hi about the singing," said Azalea.

"It seems mighty queer to me how you-all don't know about singings," ma replied. "It ain't nothing but all the folks getting together and singing. They do it once a year you know — come from all over the countryside. There now, look yonder! See them wagons coming from all parts? They're all off for Rutherford Plain where the old Friendly Meeting House

is. That was built before the war, all of great oak beams and boards, and it don't belong to no one denomination, but folks of whatever belief meet there and give praise and worship."

"Ain't it nice?" sighed Azalea contentedly. It was very sweet to her to be riding along there, the daughter of people who were so much thought of as the McBirneys — she who had been a wanderer, and often a hungry, neglected child, in clothes she was ashamed of, and the companion of people she had been unable to respect. Everyone had a pleasant word for Ma and Pa McBirney, and almost everyone seemed to know about her and to ask if she was their new daughter. They said they were pleased to meet her, and when they knew about Hi — and the McBirneys were quick to tell — they said they were pleased to meet him too, and that they'd like mighty well to do him a good turn if the chance offered. There was so much talking of this kind to do, that after all, Hi did not get his description of the singing, and it was only when he had reached the grove around Friendly Church that he began to understand what a happy occasion it really was.

Wagons by the twenties stood about, their

horses unhitched and tied beneath the trees. Men, women and children were gathered in groups, talking and laughing. The heavy barred doors of the old church were swung wide, and the ivy and crimson creeper peeped in at its open windows. The boys helped pa unhitch and were ready when the deep-toned bell sounded, to go with the others into the church.

The bare yet homely interior was stained a deep reddish brown by time, and the wide-swung casements let in the sky of the fair summer day. Elder Miles stood in the pulpit for a few minutes, to ask a blessing on the gathering, and then a hook-nosed, slender, restless old man with a voice like a silver trumpet got up and called for volunteers for the first singing. He said he thought it would be better to have the middle-aged folks at the first table, so to speak, and that the young folks could wait for second helping.

With that, men and women arose in various parts of the room and went forward. Their weather-colored, work-worn faces were lighted with smiles as they went down the aisle, nodding to acquaintances shyly, and taking their places in the seats which had been arranged just below

the pulpit. There seemed to be no need to inquire which was soprano, alto, tenor or bass. They had met together for years, and knew each other's voices well. There were only two who hesitated as if not quite sure where to go, and Azalea, seeing them, was surprised to see that it was Mrs. Carson and a tall handsome man, with a touch of gray in his hair, whom she took at once to be Carin's father. The hook-nosed man came forward to inquire politely as to their voices, and after shaking hands with them, placed them among the sopranos and the tenors.

Then a fresh-faced young woman seated herself at the organ, and in a moment the chorus of voices broke on Azalea's ear. It was not the way she had expected it to be — that music. It was sad, although full of worship and trust. The voices wavered curiously, and seemed to flutter on the notes something as a flag flutters in the wind. Perhaps the alto and the bass were a little too strong for the more musical parts; but at any rate, at first, the little girl was disappointed. Then, somehow, she began to like it. She felt the tears come stinging to her eyes, though she could not have told why, and a lump gathered in her throat. She forgot the men and

women and the haggard old meeting house, forgot the sound of the pines without and the humming of the bees; and she seemed for a moment — a wonderful moment — to be in mid-air like a bird, and to hear a strange, sad, holy song coming up to her from men and women who toiled, and hoped, and loved, and suffered, down on the earth.

Some one offered her a hymn book, and the strange moment passed, and she was able to follow the hymns. They had noble words to them, and her heart seemed to grow bigger as she read them. Such words suited her — fed something in her that was hungry and cried for food. She began to understand why it was that Pa and Ma McBirney were so good. They had been taught these words from the time that they were children. They had grown up with these beautiful thoughts in their hearts.

After a time the young people were called for, and the older ones took their seats. The young wives went and their brown-faced husbands, and the fresh-faced, wistful girls, and the boys with their bright eyes. Azalea loved to look at them, they seemed so strong and contented. She liked the bright frocks of the girls, and the way

their hair was braided, and though she tried to think of other things, she fell to picturing a green lawn frock she would have some day when she made money for herself, and the figured sash — green leaves on a white ground — she would wear with it.

Just then, the man who was sitting next Azalea arose and went over by the window, and a moment later some one slipped down into the place he had left and gave Azalea's hand a squeeze. Azalea turned her head as quick as a frightened bird, and there sat Carin Carson, smiling at her as if they were old friends.

"I was so glad when I saw you here," she whispered. "Isn't it a pity they don't ask the children to sing? I just love to sing, don't you?"

Azalea shook her head. She had sung many a time for the people who came to the show, but she had hated the silly songs she was made to sing, and as she thought of them now she blushed.

"I don't believe I really *can* sing," she whispered back. "I could once, but my voice is spoiled. I sang too loud, and now it's all rough and horrid."

"I don't believe it," returned her friend. "Your voice is so pleasant when you speak that I don't see how it can be horrid when you sing. I'm to have a singing teacher come to the house twice a week, and I wish you'd come down some time and have her hear you. Perhaps you sing a great deal better than you think you do."

"No, no," whispered Azalea, shaking her head. "I do everything wrong!"

Carin laughed under her breath and gave her friend's hand another squeeze. She was thinking that Azalea was the prettiest girl in the place, but she had been taught that it was not nice to pay people compliments, and so she said nothing of what was in her mind. But she decided that she would enjoy Azalea's society for that day, and when the singing adjourned for the people to eat their lunch, Carin insisted that the McBirneys and her people should eat together. So, by dint of urging and introducing, she finally had the pleasure of seeing her father and mother and Mr. and Mrs. McBirney seated together beneath the shade of some glorious tulip trees, spreading their luncheons out on one table cloth.

Mr. and Mrs. Carson were people who had

traveled in many foreign places, and had heard and seen much that was most beautiful and wonderful in the world, but their ways were so simple and hearty that neither Mary nor Thomas McBirney felt abashed with them. In fact, the Carsons were ignorant of many things in the country round about them, and they asked questions as if they were children. The McBirneys answered them politely, though they really couldn't help wondering how it was that such learned people didn't know ginseng when they saw it, or that they hadn't heard about the asbestos mines in the neighborhood, or didn't understand how to trap the rabbits that spoiled the gardens.

Azalea was fascinated with the free ways all these Carsons had. They seemed to say whatever came into their heads, and they laughed outright in such a hearty and happy way that those who heard them had to laugh too. Mr. Carson kept running through the hymn tunes he had heard, though he did it in a quiet, charming way, not at all as if he wished to attract attention, but as if he felt himself among friends who would allow him to follow his impulses. He was, of course, different from all of the other

men there, yet he had a way of making it seem as if they did him a favor when they were friendly with him, and Azalea heard him heartily thanking the hook-nosed man — Mr. Pickett, his name was — for having asked him and Mrs. Carson to sing.

“I never quite had a chance to sing as much as I wanted to,” he said laughingly. “I sing when I get up, and when I’m in my bath tub, and when I walk and when I ride. If my wife would let me I’d sing at the table, particularly when I see my favorite kind of custard pie coming on — but though I’ve done my best, I’ve not had my sing out yet.”

“Well, if you live down this way long enough, sir,” answered Mr. Pickett, “we’ll try to satisfy you yet.”

Mr. Pickett said there would be quite a long recess before the singing “took up” again, so Azalea and Carin wandered away in the woods together. Azalea couldn’t help feeling just a trifle awkward and shy with this graceful girl, whose clothes seem to move with a mysterious rustle, and who was like a flower, giving out faint odors of violet as she walked. Her laugh was gay, but soft, and every word she spoke

seemed to have another accent than that to which Azalea was used. Azalea wondered how she could be so well pleased with a simple girl like herself, and with all these hard-working folk, and she tried to say something of the kind, but she could find no fit words. So they talked about the woods, and about the sort of picnics they liked, and about how afraid they were — or weren't — of thunder storms.

As they went on, they came to a beautiful hollow in the woods. There was soft, very green grass in the bottom of this cup-shaped place, and ferns and delicate vines grew on the sides.

"What a lovely, lovely place!" cried Carin, clasping her hands. "Fit for the fairy queen, isn't it, Azalea?"

"Do you believe in fairies?" asked Azalea almost indignantly.

"Believe in them?" repeated Carin. "I believe in whatever I want to believe in. Don't you think it's fun to believe in fairies?"

"What's the use of believing in a thing that isn't true?"

"Oh, well," said Carin, sighing, as if she found it rather hard to bridge the distance between Azalea's mind and her own, "some

thoughts are for use and some are for fun. My shoes are for use, but my gold beads are for fun. Ideas are like that too. I know the earth turns over and makes day and night; I play there are fairies just to suit myself. It's like trimming on a dress — thoughts of that kind. You like trimming on a dress, don't you, Azalea?"

But Azalea's answer was a low cry.

"Don't move, Carin! Don't move! Oh, Carin, the snake!"

Carin looked and saw. Before her, coiled and ready for its wicked spring, was a snake with a gleaming, splendid skin, green and brown and iridescent tints, in diamond shaped pattern, and on the summer air was a dry, curious rattle that told both the girls its alarming story. Carin said nothing for the second or two in which she realized her danger, and she seemed only to half hear Azalea's sharp cry:

"Now, jump to one side, Oh, quick!"

But she had no time to obey, for at that instant, a shot rang on the air, and the wicked head of the serpent drooped.

"Oh, Oh!" screamed Azalea, more terrified now that the danger was over than she had been before. And "Oh," sighed Carin softly, and

slid down to the ground and sat there, very white, with one hand to her lips.

“It’s all right, honey bird, all right,” cried a voice near them. “That there sarpent can’t do you no manner of harm now. You jest sit still a minute or two and get over your scare, and then I’ll escort you back to your folks.”

Carin and Azalea both turned and looked into the eyes of a wonderful old man — looked into eyes, large, dark, and soft, half hidden beneath bushy eyebrows, and set beneath a beetling brow. His hair was iron-gray, curling and thick, and it stood up on his head in such a way as to make him look two or three inches taller than he really was, and that was quite unnecessary, for he stood, as he was quick to declare, six feet and four inches in his stocking feet. He was very thin, and when he walked he seemed on the point of falling to pieces, because he had what is known as double joints, so that his arms and legs swung about in almost any way he wished to have them, and his head turned about with wonderful ease on his long neck.

He stooped now — and it was an amazing thing to see him do it — and picked up a fiddle which he had laid against the trunk of a tree.

"It certainly was a mighty convenient thing, having that gun along," he said. "Old brother serpent, he never would have waited for me to get after him with a stick. A bullet was the only thing that could put him out of business, and I wa'n't sure I could hit him at that distance — couldn't have, I reckon, if the case hadn't been so pressing."

Carin got up and ran toward him with her hands outstretched.

"Thank you! Thank you, sir!" she said, in that pretty eager way of hers. "I know what you've done for me, and I must take you to see my papa and mamma. Why, it was wonderful! I'll never forget it as long as I live."

"Steady on, steady on," said the man. "Knocking the head off a tarnation rascal like that is no new business with me. Glad, though, to have served you, little miss."

He bowed low, and the girls watched him, fascinated.

"I didn't hear you playing this morning, sir," went on Carin. "Weren't you in at the Singing? I should think they'd love to have you play."

"My innings are coming, Miss Honey Bird,"

replied the man smiling. "There ain't been a singing at Friendly Church for thirty years that hain't had old Haystack Thompson there, a fiddling. But I was late getting here to-day. I've been farming it away up on Rabbit Nose Mountain, and I had to hoof it down here. I started early enough, but I got lazy like and laid down and dozed off. When I woke, the sun was high overhead and I just piked along, but even then I found myself late."

"You will play, though, won't you, sir?"

"You bet I will, Miss Honey Bird. And I pray the Lord will keep a guard over my bow and hold it down to hymn tunes. If so be, that thar bow should get Old Nick in it, as I've known it to do afore now, I might have the whole kit and boodle footing the Highland fling or the Virginia reel right there on the floor of the meeting house."

Carin laughed merrily.

"Oh, do come along quick and meet papa," she said. "You'll be such good friends." She ran ahead in her eagerness, urging "Haystack Thompson" to follow.

It had not been necessary for her to ask why he had this curious name, for she knew very

well that it had been given to him because of his wild crop of hair, which did indeed look like a stack of hay after a bad windstorm.

"I'd no idea that Azalea and I had come so far," she said to her new friend. "We wandered on and on, talking, and when we came to that lovely hollow we couldn't keep out of it."

They were getting to the clearing, and they could see the people moving toward the church. Mr. Thompson caught a glimpse of Mr. Pickett, and the two musicians greeted each other like long-lost brothers, and walked toward the meeting house in great enthusiasm, making an odd pair, for Mr. Pickett, for all of his air of importance, reached no higher than Mr. Thompson's shoulder. Carin found her father just as he was going in the door and dragged him back to meet her new acquaintance; and a moment later, everyone had seen "Old Haystack" and was clamoring for his music. Mr. Thompson was given the post of honor, and there he stood, towering up toward the pointed roof, his faded fiddle in his hand, tears in his eyes, smiling at his old friends.

He tuned up carefully, and ran his bow lovingly across the string a few times, then gave a

shake to the "haystack" and began to play "Old Hundred." At first it was as if a deep voice, full of love of God and life were singing; then as if a chorus of children's voices sang it in joy; then as if the wind called it to the sea and the sea answered; then as if the hills shouted it and the voices of all living things joined in.

Carin found herself on her feet — found herself, indeed, wishing that she could fly. For a moment it seemed as if she *were* flying, but when she looked about her, she saw that she was not, but was standing singing at the top of her lungs with all the others. And then for an hour, while the tall, gaunt fiddler drew his music from his instrument, and the people followed him as if they had one voice, Carin forgot everything in the world except the music. But suddenly it ended. The fiddler played some minor theme which no one knew, and which was born in his brain that moment. All the people took it for the note of parting and filed out of the church. And once out, they seemed in little mood to talk. They had been too deeply moved for that. They preferred to get in their vehicles and drive off into the silence of the lonely mountain roads. Carin, certainly, was glad that she could snuggle

in the back seat of their surrey with her mother, and sit there in quiet. She was strangely tired, and wanted nothing in the world except to rest, and she thought, in the back of her mind, that probably Azalea was feeling the same way. That made her wonder how it was that she had not seen Azalea after they all went back into the church, and she was just going to speak to her mother about it, when Mrs. McBirney came running toward them with a white face.

“We can’t find Azalea anywhere,” she cried. “We’ve looked everywhere — pa and Jim and Hi, and Mr. Pickett and lots of others. We can’t find her anywhere!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE KIDNAPPING

"Why, she can't be far away," cried Carin, trembling in spite of herself. "I'm sure I can find her, Mrs. McBirney. Where's Mr. Thompson? He'll go with me back to the place where we were together. She came after us for a way, I know. I thought she followed the whole way, but the singing was just beginning, and I ran in the church, not noticing."

"Of course we'll find her, Mrs. McBirney," Mr. Carson declared stoutly. "The child couldn't get lost in a clearing like this."

"Perhaps she lit out," drawled a mountain woman who was standing near. "You can't tell what a girl brought up to lead a wandering life might do. Tramps like that ain't to be depended on to keep to roof and hearth."

Mary McBirney turned toward the woman with flashing eyes.

"My Azalea wouldn't do anything to make me trouble, ma'am," she said. "She's got a

heart of gold. Something has happened — that's the whole of it — something has happened."

Carin had sped in search of Mr. Thompson, and having found him, the two set off in the woods in search of the dell. "Haystack's" hair seemed to tower higher than ever, and his green felt cover was half off his violin, and dangled among the bushes as the two hastened through the wood. In Carin's heart was the terrible thought of the rattlesnake. What if the mate to the one Mr. Thompson had killed had stung Azalea! But why, then, had she not cried out? It was past imagining. Mr. Thompson took Carin's hand in his that they might go faster, and the two hastened on through the sun-flecked wood till they came to the beautiful hollow with the soft green grass. But they could see nothing of Azalea, and their calls and halloos brought no answer.

"We must try another tack," said Mr. Thompson. "Something queer about this — something mighty queer."

So all the neighbors seemed to think. The news that Azalea was missing had spread rapidly. It had overtaken the departing wagon-

loads of neighbors, who returned to lend their assistance to their distressed neighbors. Parties ran out in all directions, scouring the woods, calling, peeping into the old well, and visiting the near-by houses. No one had seen or heard anything of the girl.

"You don't think she'd go into hiding, sister McBirney," inquired good old Elder Mills, with sympathy in his eye. "She didn't seem like that sort of a girl, but she might have taken offense at something when no offense was meant. Young folks are like that, sometimes. I ran away from a good home twice when I was a boy, because my feelings were so precious tender. Great fools young folks are! And the worst of it is, they don't all grow out of their folly when they get older."

Mrs. McBirney stood there among her neighbors and cast her eye first on this group and then on that.

"I must say it clear and plain," she said in her pleasant voice; "I trust that girl like I would my own son here. She loves me and I love her, and we're heart to heart. She's in some kind of trouble, and I reckon I know what it is."

"What?" demanded twenty voices.

"Them show people has stole her. They said they would, and they waited till we was off the watch, and took their chance."

"Why, ma," said Thomas McBirney, "they've been gone weeks and weeks. They had about all they wanted of this community."

"They must have come back then," answered Mrs. McBirney with gentle obstinacy, "for they've gone and took my girl."

The words faltered in her throat, and Jimmy, who was watching her, ran to her and slipped his arms about her. It was the first time that his mother had realized that he was not a little boy. She found in that moment of sorrow that by bowing her head, she could weep on his sturdy young shoulder, and that he seemed strong to comfort her.

Hi Kitchell drew near, his eyes shining in a face that was white beneath all his tan.

"Zalie didn't run away," he said in his rather gruff voice, which was changing from a boy's to a man's, and was now in his throat and now in his head. "You can't make me think Zalie ran away. She wouldn't do such a mean thing."

"I'm sure she wouldn't, Hi," broke in the soft tones of Mrs. Carson. "She was too kind and

too happy. I think we'd better drive home, each going our proper way, watching out on every side for her, and get the sheriff to send word to all the towns round about. If the show people have taken her, it ought to be an easy matter to find her, for the show is bound to go to the towns."

"Yes, yes," broke in her husband. "Let's do something! I can't stand this waiting around, not knowing what may be happening to the poor child. Mr. Pickett tells me he'll have every inch of woods for a radius of two miles around, searched by some of these young men. So we may leave that quite in his hands. But he thinks, and I think, that the child has been carried away. He said he heard the show people kept making their threats. They heard of the Singing, and judged that Azalea would be here and that it was their chance."

"We ought to have cared for her better," moaned Ma McBirney. "Thomas, I blame myself for not looking after her better."

"Well, Mary, you'll have to do all the blaming yourself then, for nobody else will do it. We've set ourselves to war against the children

of Satan, and they've been more wily than we took them to be. That's all there is to it."

A light rain had begun to fall and the glory of the day was quite gone as the people turned from the grove around Friendly Church and moved off along the six roads that debouched from that gathering place.

Carin looked sadly from the little window in the curtains of their surrey, and wondered what strange thing could be happening to her friend. Though several hours had passed since she was lost, and though at least two hundred persons had joined in the search for her, and she had not been found, still, Carin found it impossible to realize that anything could have happened to the laughing girl who had run with her through the woods to the green dell.

Usually Carin liked to ride in the rain. It was fun to cuddle down beneath the robes, in the dusk of the curtained carriage, and "play." Carin knew how to play much more delightful things without toys than with them. She had only to begin pretending that she was a princess who was being stolen and carried into the desert; or that she was a missionary traveling over the Himalayas; or a pirate's daughter, going to hide

treasure; or any other of a hundred things, to have a beautiful time. One of her favorite "pretends" had been that about the stolen princess. But the story had come true in a way, and Carin found it was not nearly so amusing as she had thought it would be.

The rain grew heavier and the sky sulkier, and when they reached home, it was chilly and almost dark. To be sure the great house was lighted up, and a fire was burning in the living room, and a delicious supper was spread. But these things did not bring as much comfort as usual. Mrs. Carson had insisted that the McBirneys should not climb the mountain that night.

"You'll only have to come down in the morning," she said. "Spend the night with us. We'll telephone the sheriff and get him up here; and we'll telegraph all the surrounding towns, and you'll be right here to help and advise."

"But there's the stock," objected Thomas McBirney. "I can't leave the poor dumb beasts hungering and thirsting."

"Hi and me'll look after them, pa," said Jim. "You just let us take the horses, and we'll ride up there and 'tend to things."

"'Deed we will," agreed Hi. "The only trouble is, I ought to be at the mill in the morning. They'll be looking for me."

Hi spoke as if the mill would shut down if he didn't get there on time, and Mr. Carson couldn't conceal a smile. He liked Hi's important businesslike ways and his fashion of taking responsibility. So he answered gravely:

"Allow me to call up the manager of the mill the first thing in the morning, Hi, and apprise him of the situation. I may be able to get him at breakfast, so that he'll know just what to expect before he reaches the office."

It seemed a reasonable arrangement to Hi, and he hadn't the faintest notion of the smiles of his elders. So, mounted on the bare backs of the McBirney horses, the boys set out to ride up the mountain in the rain. Each wore an old raincoat which Mr. Carson had fished up from somewhere about the house, and each carried a lantern.

"It certainly looks mighty lonely to me for them boys to start off up that mountain alone," sighed Pa McBirney. "But I couldn't endure it to think of the stock going unfed."

"You don't suppose those dreadful people

will get after Hi, too, do you?" Carin whispered to her mother. Mrs. Carson started and looked troubled.

"I declare Carin, I don't know. I'm all at sea. I've read of things like this, but nothing of the sort ever came into my life before, and I can't more than half believe it."

"That's just the way I feel, mamma. There's a ring at the doorbell. Perhaps it's the sheriff."

It was the sheriff, Mr. James Coulter, a heavy man with small eyes and a square jaw, and with him was Haystack Thompson.

"You'll have to excuse me for coming along," Haystack apologized. "But I'm in this hunt to stay. Life's been lagging along pretty slow with me lately and now here something comes that looks to me like a man's work, and I'll be plum-basted, if I don't want a hand in it."

Thomas McBirney held out his hand.

"You always was one for adventures, Mr. Thompson," he said, with emotion in his voice. "We're grateful for your help."

So they sat together, planning and scheming, till Carin fell asleep on the sofa, and the oil burned out of the lamps. The rain fell heavier and heavier and blew in gusts against the pane.

And when Carin staggered up to bed with the help of Mammy Thula, it seemed to her as if all the pleasant things had stopped happening and only trouble was at hand.

Very much the same sort of an idea was lying in the bottom of Ma McBirney's mind, though she tried to answer cheerfully when her Thomas spoke to her, and she said her prayers as if she had perfect faith that they were to be answered. But the truth was, she was too worried just then to have much faith. She imagined the frightful things that might be happening to her poor Azalea, and she realized more than ever how dear the child had become to her, and how she loved her merry ways and her odd turns of mind, and her way of acting as if the world was hers. But, more than that — Oh, much more than that just at that particular moment, was her anxiety for her own James Stuart. What was her boy doing just then, she wondered. The rain was simply threshing against the pane, and she knew in what torrents it would pour down the mountain side, ripping new gulleys for itself and deepening the old ones. It was black as only night and cloud can make the world, and the horses would be wearied and fretted.

"I doubt we were right in letting those poor boys go up the mountain to-night, Thomas," she said, just as the good Pa McBirney was sinking into slumber. "We might better have let the creatures go hungry for a while than to risk the lives of those boys."

"Go to sleep, Mary," commanded Mr. McBirney in a sleepy voice. "I've got to have my night's rest." And indeed, he seemed to be beginning it before he had finished his sentence, for the next moment above all the clamor and uproar of the gale, ma could hear his steady and wholesome snore.

But she lay awake, turning this way and that, creeping out of bed to look from the window, where nothing could be seen but this latter deluge, and then huddling in again, praying for the three wandering children.

And as a matter of fact, prayers could not come amiss for any of them that night. And really, her own freckled Jim needed them rather more than the two she had taken under her motherly wing. For James Stuart McBirney encountered that night one of the greatest dangers of his short but interesting career. The two drenched boys had urged their horses up the

slippery mountain road, and the horses had plunged on, half blinded by the storm. The way had been difficult, but all had gone well enough till they came to the falls where Jim had, several weeks before, shown Hi his mill and dam. The fall was roaring down the mountain side, and the boys had no choice but to cross the swollen torrent as it foamed and writhed across the roadway. In fair weather this was a safe enough crossing, and Jim loved it beyond any words of his to say. He would pause here while his horse drank, and he himself would sit staring at the dream-like valley, thinking vague and happy thoughts. But tonight, as he was to learn, the great boulders that had been placed at the outer edge of the road had been carried away, and the black water was an enemy — the water which had so often been his playmate. Midstream, he felt his horse slipping.

“Mac!” he called sharply, slapping the animal encouragingly, “Mac! Pull up!”

But Mac, it seemed, could not pull up, though he tried desperately. His feet went out from under him, and he lay on his side, with the waters raging about him and bearing him

toward that desperate edge. Once over that, they would drop sheer one hundred and fifty feet upon jagged rocks where the waters twisted and hissed like angry serpents. Fortunately, Mac had not gone down quickly, but after a struggle, and Jim had had time to free himself from the stirrups. He stood there in the flood now, with the frantic horse between him and that deadly fall. The bridle reins were still in his hands, and he held to them with the instinct of the born horseman, though what a slender boy could do with a frightened horse in a raging torrent, it is not easy to imagine. Jim felt both of them going, and said to himself: "One second more and I'll let old Mac go and get out of this — if I can!" when suddenly the great body of the horse caught and held. Jim felt that the animal was bracing himself against something strong and firm, and he let go the reins to escape the plunging hoofs. But the next moment, freed from the horse's sustaining back, he found himself swept from his feet and caught in the terrible swirl of the waters. Then, for the first time, he screamed "Hi! Hi!" though he knew there was small chance that Hi could hear him. And at that instant, a terrible thought

flashed over his mind. What if Hi had not been able to cross the ford! What if he, too, had gone down!

"Hi! Hi!" shouted Jim in his throat. A thousand wicked voices of the storm answered him; the cruel hands of the flood clutched him. He swept on, closed his eyes, and in his terrified, dry little mind thought:

"I reckon that's about all of me!"

And then, somehow, miraculously, he too was caught and held. True, the waters were pounding him, he was smothering with the spray, but at least he was not being tossed over the brink. He thrust out desperate hands and clutched the obstruction. It was a tree in full leaf, which had been swept from the upper fall and had somehow snarled there on the rocks. It was what had saved Mac, and at the end of a frightened, determined struggle, Jim, standing ankle deep, in the red mud of the road, knew that it had saved him too. And there, at his hand, trembling, but safe, was good old Mac.

It seemed strange to Jim that his throat could be so dry when his very skin was soaking and the heavens were emptying torrents all about

him, but it was all he could do to shriek out: "Hi! Oh, Hi!"

No voice answered. "He's gone," sobbed Jim. "He's gone over the fall! Oh, what shall I do?"

But just then above the road came a sharp voice in his ears.

"Shut up there, ninny! I'm here all right."

"Where? Where?"

"Where you'll step on me if you don't watch out. I guess my arm's broke, Jim. Nannie went down at the ford, but she got out and ran away from me. Piked for home, I guess. I hit something, and crawled out, and then I sort o' went to sleep. One arm's acting funny—it won't work."

"Oh, Hi," cried Jim, "never mind if your arm is broke; that can be mended. But if you'd gone over —"

"No glue would mend me then," answered Hi. He struggled to his feet, and the two boys went on in the darkness. They left Mac to plunge up the road as best suited him. Both had cast away their lanterns after the rain and wind had put out the light, and they tramped on in the blur of mist which told them that they

were in the very heart of a cloud. Sometimes Hi could not keep back a groan, though he tried manfully.

"You just brace up, Hi, you hear?" said Jim with affectionate roughness. "You're in luck to only break one bone. My goodness, what's one bone when you've hundreds of 'em in your body?"

Hi set his strong white teeth together and trudged on. The way seemed like an endless bad dream. But finally he heard Jim say: "We're here." And they were. They were in the good dry cabin, and Hi had sunk on the settle while Jim lighted the lamps and lit the fire. That done, he went out to the horse shed and came back with the cheering news that both horses were in their stalls.

"And now," he said, "let's see what we can do about your arm. I know there's arnica in the house."

"Arnica!" cried Hi in anguished contempt. "Do you think rubbing will do *that* any good?" He dangled the limp lower arm before Jim's horrified gaze.

"No," said a gruff voice, "rubbing won't

help it none, but setting will, and I'm the man to do it for you."

The boys turned as quick as owls, and there, standing in the doorway was a tall, dripping man in homespun mountain clothes.

"Why, Buck Bab!" cried Jim, "Where did you come from?"

Hi's eyes started from his head.

"Ain't you the man that chased me with a gun the other night?" he asked.

Bab wrung the rain out of his hair and grinned at Hi.

"Maybe I am," he said, "and maybe I ain't. But one thing's certain: I'm going to set that there arm of yours, son." To Jim he said, "You go find me a shingle. Rip one off the house if you can't do any other way, and I'll take the liberty of tearing up one of your ma's old sheets." He bustled about the cabin getting everything in readiness, and then he came over to Hi, smiling curiously.

"'Twon't be very bad," he said almost tenderly. He stooped over him and seemed to tap him gently on the jaw somewhere below the ear. Jim couldn't make out what was going on. Suddenly Hi seemed to be asleep, and he was mak-

ing no objection at all as Buck Bab's great hands busied themselves with drawing the broken arm from the coat and shirt that hampered them.

"What have you done, Buck Bab!" demanded Jim, thoroughly frightened. "What's the matter with Hi?"

"Now, don't worry, McBirney," answered Bab gruffly. "I just fixed your friend so he wouldn't be inconvenienced by what I'm about to do. He's just taking a little nap to order. He'll be all right in a minute or two, and by that time I'll have his arm set as tight as a trap. You didn't want to hear his hollering and crying, did you?"

"No — o," said Jim doubtfully. He drew nearer to his friend and stood there ready to give any help that Bab should need.

In ten minutes it was all over. The arm was in place and held there safely with bandages and splints. Hi's wet clothes had been dragged from him and he had been wrapped in a warm blanket. His eyes began to flutter and a sick look to come into his white face.

"Lie still," growled Bab to him, "and think of nothing. And you, McBirney, I suppose you come up here to look after the stock. Well, get

out that lantern and find the milk pails, and I'll help you. After we've fixed up the animals, we'll get some supper."

"Well," thought Jim to himself, as he obeyed the man, "who would believe it? I know pa wouldn't, and I don't believe ma would, though she always says there's some good in everybody. Buck Bab a moonshiner, and not denying it! And yet here he is, helping me out! It seems like a night with a lot of queer dreams in it. Oh, my! Poor Zalie! Oh, Zalie, where can you be!"

CHAPTER IX

HAYSTACK THOMPSON

Haystack Thompson lay in bed making uncomplimentary remarks about the rain.

"It's just took away the last chanct we had of following up that poor little mountain lass," said he to his old clock. "If it hadn't been for this tarnation storm I'd 'a' tramped back to that there dell where I come on them two lasses making eyes at that rattler, and it would have been mighty funny if I couldn't have found out something about what happened there."

He reached out for his bag of tobacco, and filling his pipe and lighting it, tried to bring some cheer into his damp cabin by smoking very hard.

"I'd have gone over the whole ground," he mused. "I'd 'a' pretended I was walking on with that nice little Miss Carin, talking and smiling; I'd thought out how the other lass hung behind, looking at the trees and flowers, and I'd never have give up till I made out why she

didn't reach that church. But here we are, everything swept smooth as sandpaper with the storm!"

He fell to wishing that for once in his life there was some one to build the fire for him and get the breakfast.

"It's lonesome business," said he aloud, "being pa and ma and all the children just by yourself. Looks hoggish, now, don't it? I wish I'd divided up and just been the man of the house, and let some other folks take the rest of the parts. I'm a no-count old fool, anyhow. No one but a plumb idiot would 'a' let that there girl be snatched away like that yesterday. A blamed, sapless old fool, that's what I be! Me with nothing but a fiddle to give me an excuse for living! For my farming would make you sick to look at. The neighbors snigger when they see it. Well, what do you think of that now, for a man to reach my age and have nothing but a fiddle that he cares for!"

He flung out of bed in disgust, whipped into his old clothes, lighted the fire—which proceeded to smoke badly—and got out his bacon and his bag of meal.

"I'm just plumb tired of cooking alone," he

announced to a squirrel that paused for a moment before his door, sitting erect on his haunches and casting a wistful glance from his bright eyes. Haystack tossed him some ground nuts which he kept in a bag for that purpose, and then turned angrily to his own meal. Half-way through it, he laid down his knife and fork, and a light broke over his face.

"I know what I'll do," he said, "I'll go find that little lass. I'll make myself of some use, that's what I'll do. See here, Betsy," he went on, turning to his violin and speaking to it as if it were a little sister, "you and me'll start out and find that there poor lass, you hear? We've been playing stick-in-the-mud about long enough. What we need is to get a move on us and to go out and see something of the world. What you say, Bet?"

Just then a log fell on the hearth, and from Betsy's answering strings came forth a delicate wail. Haystack took it to mean that they should go, and when he had made his cabin tidy—and he took much more pains with it than usual—he put on clean homespun, packed a change of clothing in a square of blue denim, fastened this to a stick which he threw over his

shoulder, and taking Betsy under the other arm, started out on a quest.

At about the same time the sheriff at Lee and Pa McBirney and Mr. Carson and Elder Mills and Mr. Pickett and a great many other persons were bestirring themselves to the same end. They telegraphed here and they telephoned there, and all over the county the good neighbors were keeping an outlook. Ma McBirney and Mrs. Carson kept together and talked over this and that phase of the matter, and both of them poured out their kind hearts in good wishes, as if their love would build a wall around the lost child to keep her from harm.

"Let no evil touch her, dear Lord," prayed Mary McBirney over and over again. "Thy power is everywhere, and Thy love is all protecting. Spread Thy love about her like a cloak and keep her from harm."

And that was just about the time that Azalea, aroused from her thin and worried sleep by the first streaks of the dawn that streamed to her over the level low country, drew the dirty bed-clothes closer about her chin, and tried to make out whether or not it was all a bad dream. Tige, the bulldog, crouching there at the tent door,

and snarling if she but moved, certainly seemed like a nightmare. Betty Bowen with her frowsy head and her horrid red flannel bedgown, sleeping with her mouth open on the shake-down next to Azalea, and the miserable old show wagon outside, with lumbering Rafe Bowen, the son of Betty, snoring in rivalry to the robins — not that his opera in any way resembled theirs — was something worse than ordinary nightmare.

“It isn’t a dream,” sighed Azalea, with deep, terrible conviction. “It’s true.”

She went over the sharp little drama of all that had happened the day before; remembered the sweet hollow in the woods where she and Carin had gone, the fright they had had at the snake, the appearance of that queer, kind old Haystack Thompson; she remembered how she had followed them a little way, and then had stopped for some wake robins which were growing in a sunny little spot and which she had thought would look lovely at Ma McBirneys’ belt; and then had come the strange whimpering of an animal in pain. She had thought it a dog caught in a rabbit trap, and she had gone toward it, and as she went on, the sound seemed

to move too, and it grew more agonizing as if the animal were being tortured beyond anything it could stand. And then, suddenly, from among the great trees, had come Sisson, the "show-man," her old enemy. He had his huge hand over her mouth in a minute, and had pushed her before him, making her run against her will, and presently they were among all the old companions of her wandering years. Rafe Bowen, who had run away three years before, was back too. He was a big fellow with broad shoulders and a sullen face. And there was a new woman—to take her mother's place, Azalea thought. They had laughed at her and told Sisson not to be too rough with her.

"You treat her like she was a mad steer, Hank," Betty Bowen had said. "Don't scare the young un like that."

Sisson let go of her and pushing her a little way from him broke into a roar of laughter. It made cold chills run over the girl. She knew that when Sisson laughed it was when some one else was in trouble. Nearly the only thing he really enjoyed was tormenting some one.

"She ran out to meet me," he cried, roaring with that cruel laughter, his eyes full of evil

pleasure. "Just toddled out to meet me, she did. You never saw anything like it. Couldn't stay away from her old friend, Zalie couldn't. Once a show girl always a show girl, eh?"

Azalea had been learning lessons of self-control since she had been with Mary McBirney, but now her old-time temper flamed up in her. She felt the familiar wave of fire sweeping across her brain and she screamed out angry things at Sisson.

"I'm no show girl!" she protested. "I never wanted to be a show girl. I think you are wicked, wicked, Hank Sisson! You've taken me away from the best people I ever knew and they'll be so frightened! Oh, please, Mrs. Bowen, make him let me go. Oh, Hank Sisson I hate you! I hate you! Oh, why isn't my mamma alive? You wouldn't dare treat me like this if she was alive. You bad, bad man!"

"You can see for yourself what a fine performer she is," Sisson sneered. "High tragedy, that's her line."

"Oh, Mrs. Bowen," wailed the girl, "mamma was good to you. Won't you help me?"

"Turning on the tear taps now," grinned Sisson.

"Oh, shut up," snapped the new woman. "What did you expect the girl to do? Didn't think she'd rejoice, did you? Leave her be, you Sisson. You've got her, that's the main thing; now give her a chance to cool down a little. I'm sorry for the young un, that's what I am — taking her away from a good home to tag along with a lot like us!"

Sisson raised his heavy fist and made as if to strike the woman.

"You take your choice," he growled. "Shut up or be shut up."

"While we're rowing around here, Hank," broke in Betty Bowen, "the folks will be after us. Do we carry out our plan, or don't we?"

"We carry it out and we do it quick," announced Sisson. Nor was Azalea long in finding out what the plan was. Taking it for granted that as soon as Azalea was missed, the Sisson All Star Combination would be under suspicion, it was the intention of Sisson and his troupe to go on up into the mountains; but Betty Bowen and her son Rafe were to take the best team of horses, and the wagon with its load of conveniences, hide by night in the woods, and then make their way before dawn into South

Carolina. The state line was not more than twelve miles from where they then were, and once across that, they were comparatively safe.

This program had been carried out rapidly — more rapidly, in fact, than was at first intended. Azalea was compelled to go in the old covered wagon and to lie down there under a pile of odds and ends. Betty sat beside her son Rafe and directed their course. They had struck an old wood-road, and wound along through the heart of a silent forest, meeting no one. So much more solitary was the road than they had supposed it would be that Betty urged her son to press on. The horses were young and strong — a new team which Azalea had not before seen — and the result was that by twelve o'clock that night they had camped in an out-of-the-way grove across the line dividing the two Carolinas. The mountains were left behind, and an almost level plain stretched around them. But the underbrush in this grove of poor trees was thick, and as Betty intended to do her cooking at night and to show no smoke from her camp fire to curious strangers during the day, they felt that there was little danger of their being found.

The rain that had drenched the valley of Lee

had thrown out no more than a light shower over the spot where the Bowens kept Azalea prisoner, and while the girl lay on her rickety bed wondering what had happened back at home, she did not dream of the wild experiences through which her friends Jim and Hi had been passing. It was not of them that she thought chiefly — though she knew how they would be fuming about her and putting plans on foot for her recovery — but of Ma McBirney and her anxiety.

“I’m so used to having bad times,” thought the little girl wrapping her arms tight about her body as if for company, “that I can stand them. But Ma McBirney isn’t used to them. She’ll just fret herself crazy.”

She had perfect confidence in the ability of her friends to find her. She had thought all that out in that strange, dangerous drive at night through the old wood-road. People like Pa McBirney and Mr. Carson weren’t the kind to give up hunting for her.

“I’ve just got to lie low,” thought this child who had seen too much of the ways of a prowling company of folk, “and take care of myself the best way I can, and I’ll be found. I’ll be

back in Ma McBirney's house all right and tight in a little while. I'm going to believe that and say it over and over. I'm not going to be scared, nor sorry, nor anything. Jim and Hi will think I'm a silly thing to let myself be picked up and carried away like that, anyway. They'll think I haven't a bit of grit. But I'll show them I'm not such a stupid goose after all."

She made up her mind, too, that she would try not to think too much about Ma McBirney. If she did she would get to crying again, and she didn't want to cry. She wanted to think, and to watch, and to be wise and act at the right moment. And having reached that conclusion, she sat up in bed with something almost like brightness on her face. And at that Tige, the bulldog, sat up too and showed all of his teeth as he gave a low growl. Tige was a good dog according to his lights; and his lights told him that when his master, Rafe Bowen — according to Tige, the most wonderful master in the world — told him to "watch," why then, he was to watch; nay he was to sleep with one eye open and both ears alert.

"For goodness sake, Tige," whispered Azalea, leaning forward and putting out her hand

toward the dog, "be sensible, can't you? I've got to move sometimes, haven't I?"

Betty Bowen threw her brown arms up over her frowsy head.

"Keep still, you, Zalie," she snarled sleepily. "Don't you see I'm dead beat?"

So for two hours longer the restless girl had to lie still in her bed, though it became almost an agony to do so, while the tired show woman slept on and on. After a time, however, the little camp came to life. Rafe got up and demanded breakfast. Betty straggled out, heavy-eyed and slatternly, and set forth some cold food which Azalea could not swallow. The horses were fed, the wagon greased, and all was got in readiness for a hasty flight if necessary. Azalea helped as they directed her, and she managed to find a chance to wash carefully as Ma McBirney had taught her, and she combed her hair with a little side comb, and made herself look as well as she could.

"You've got mighty fine ways since you've been living out," remarked Betty Bowen teasingly. Azalea looked at her as candidly as she would have looked at Ma McBirney, for some-

way, in spite of all her anger, she was feeling sorry for Bet Bowen this morning.

"Yes, Mrs. Bowen," she said. "I have been taught some nice ways. Mrs. McBirney is the neatest woman you ever saw. Of course my own mamma tried to teach me things, but what was the use, when we didn't have any way to keep nice? You can't keep clean and fresh on the road, can you?"

Betty looked at the girl in sullen surprise. She had not expected to be met in this neighborly fashion. She thought to herself that if *she* were being held a prisoner, no one could get her to "chirk up" like that.

"No, you bet you can't," she said in answer to the girl's question. "Now me, I used to wash my hair and brush it, and keep my hands pretty. I wasn't always a battered old ship of the desert like I be now." Bet could be rather picturesque in her speech when she had a mind. "Fact is, I reckon I had too much good looks and too little sense once on a time. Both the sense and the looks have been knocked out of me now. I guess you or anybody can see that."

"Whatever made you take up with this show life, Mrs. Bowen?" the girl asked. They were

sitting together then on the ground, their little odd tasks being all done. Azalea was playing idly with some pine needles, braiding them together after a fashion she had, and weaving them into a little mat. In the old days she would have sat idle, but Ma McBirney had got her into the way of occupying herself with one thing and another.

"What made me take to it?" demanded Bet, turning her haggard eyes on her companion, "Why, the same thing that made your mother take to it."

There was something threatening and angry in the way she spoke, and Azalea looked at her with fear in her eyes. She could feel her heart-beats fairly strangling her, but she had the courage to seize at the remark. Ever since she was old enough to think at all, she had been puzzled and bewildered by the things about her. And now it seemed she might be told something of all she wished to know.

"And why was that, Betty?" she asked softly. "Why did my mamma have to wander around and act in a show?"

Mrs. Bowen drew an old rag of a shawl about her shoulders and leaned back against a tree.

She seemed to be trying to make up her mind whether to tell this child the truth or not. But finally she gave a little nod.

"I'm just going to up and tell you why," she said. "I think it's coming to you to know. She did it because she married a poor shiftless coot of a man, the black sheep of a way-up family, and she done it against the wishes of all her folks. She ran away from home with him, and she took care of him while he lazed around and wouldn't do nothing, and she looked after him like he was the best man in the world, and stuck to him when he gambled away all she earned. And then you was born, and she had to run away from him to get money enough to care for you."

"Oh," gasped Azalea, her hand at her heart and a sick feeling stealing over her.

"And I will say," went on Bet, "that she cared for you as tender as if you was respectable folks living in the finest house in town. She just done the best she could; and she went along with us because we didn't object to having a baby in the troupe. We began training you like a little puppy as soon as you had any mimicry in you, and the folks that came to the show liked it. Her and you was drawing cards, I can tell you.

And for all of her broken heart she was nice and cheerful except when we'd go to the towns near by where she used to live. Then she was afraid she'd meet some of them that used to know her in the old days. But at last, when she found she was going to die, she seemed glad we was edging along toward her home."

"And where was that," breathed rather than asked Azalea. "Where was her old home?"

"Law, child, don't you know that? Why, her old home was at Lee. That's where your grandfather Atherton come from — from Lee."

"My grandfather Atherton?"

"Sure, Zalie. Didn't your ma tell you that? Well, she was a close one. I don't know as she told us all, either, but we got hold of the story one way and another. When her father skipped out to parts unknown, owing to some trouble he got into at the time of the war, his wife — she was his second wife, and only a young thing — went back to her folks in Alabama for a while. And then they was made so poor by the war that she took shame to be dependent on them. So she came back to this part of the country, somewhere, and taught school, and took care of her little girl. And that little girl was your ma.

She was a pretty little thing, made to live in luxury, I allow. I suppose she sort of honed for grand ways and grand clothes. Anyway, when your pa, Jack Knox, who come of an old family and was handsome and taking in his ways, came along, she married him. She didn't know the drinking and the shiftlessness had come down to him as well as the fine manners and the handsome face. I heard your grandmother fought and fought against them two marrying, but they would have their way. So that's your story, missy, and I do think it was coming to you to know it."

Azalea stared into the woman's face with wide-stretched eyes.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Mrs. Bowen. I *am* glad to know; I do think I had a right to be told. But just think, I was in that old house the other day — that beautiful old house that belonged to my grandfather. 'The Shoals' it is called. And it's very, very queer, but I felt all the time as if I had been in it before. But of course I never had. You can't inherit memories, can you Mrs. Bowen, the way you do the features of your face, or — or habits?"

But at that moment, Betty Bowen's great hulk



"So that's your story, missy."

of a son came sauntering back from what he called a "spying."

"There ain't nobody in sight so far as I can make out," he announced sullenly. "And now suppose you two quiet down a little. I want to sleep."

He whistled his dog to him and pointed with a big forefinger at Azalea.

"Watch, Tige," he commanded. And he and the dog stretched themselves side by side, the man to sleep, and the dog to keep guard.

Azalea felt a wave of trembling creeping over her, and she turned her eyes once more to Bet.

"Oh, Mrs. Bowen," she whispered, "what have I done that you should treat me like this?"

But Mrs. Bowen lifted her finger in warning.

"Just keep still, Zalie," she answered, also under her breath, "and you won't be hurt. Sisson's a man that hits back when he's hit. He was all-fired mad at your being took from him and he swore he'd have you back. He seemed to have to do it to keep up his pride. So now he's got you, and I'm to keep you, that's all."

"But how can you, Betty? How can you? I wouldn't do anything mean to you."

Betty Bowen looked at her darkly.

“Sisson is kin of mine,” she said, as if that settled the question. “There ain’t nobody else in the world for me to turn to as I know of.”

A lump came into Azalea’s throat as she looked at Betty. To think of having no friend but Sisson! Something warm began to stir in Azalea’s heart. She did not know that the name of it was pity.

CHAPTER X

THE ESCAPE

Mrs. McBirney sat at her loom. Eyes, hands and feet were busy; but no matter how busy she kept them she could not keep her mind and heart at ease. She had come back home when she found that the search for her missing girl would be a long one, and from early morning till late at night she kept about her tasks. She had a theory that there was nothing like work to help a troubled mind to forgetfulness, and she put her theory to the full test.

Pa McBirney went about his tasks, too, and his face grew careworn as he saw the old restlessness and torment coming back in his wife's face.

"That's just the way she carried on after your sister Mollie passed away," he said to Jim. "You wouldn't think she'd take Azalea's loss so hard, but then it's kind o' emptied her life again."

"Well," said Jim in an old way he sometimes

had, "if she knew Azalea was dead and safe, perhaps she wouldn't feel so dreadful bad. But not knowing where a body is — that's what I call tormenting. When I think of the things that might be happening to Azalea — her maybe going hungry or being beat with sticks, or goodness knows what all — it makes me as nervous as a bat. Hi's just the same way, too."

Hi's broken arm had made it impossible for him to return to the mill, and he was spending his time with the McBirneys. He seemed to be actually greedy to learn all he could of this pleasant home. He listened to all Ma McBirney had to say, as if her words were gold; he watched Pa McBirney about his work; he played chess with Jim and studied Jim's school-books under Mrs. McBirney's direction.

Mrs. McBirney wrote home to his mother for him, and told her all that had happened to him. At first Hi objected.

"My uncle Hank Sisson will be after her first chance he gets, to find out where I am, and if she knows, he'll worm it out of her," the boy objected.

"That's neither here nor there, Hi," Ma McBirney had insisted. "She's just aching to know

what's happening to her boy, and I'm going to let her know. Why, you ought to be with your ma, Hi. Somehow or other we've got to get the family down here. Now, when your arm's well, you can go back to the mill, and perhaps some of the other children are old enough to take a hand too; and what with all the tourists that come to Lee, your ma could sure find work — washing, or sewing, or some such thing."

"Oh, my, wouldn't that be fun!" sighed Hi.

"See here, Mary," Pa McBirney had broke in, "what makes you lift up that boy's hopes the way you do? Like as not they'll all be dashed to earth."

"What a-way should they be dashed for, father? Ain't it right that Hi and his ma should be together? And don't you believe that what's right will come to pass?"

Pa shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know as that has been according to my experience," he said.

"Of course it has, Thomas. You know it has! And everything's going to come right for Hi — and for Azalea, Thomas — and for you and Jim and me! You'll see! You mustn't break down my faith, Thomas."

And Thomas McBirney, looking at her face with its look as of a light burning through it, knew that he must not, indeed.

The second Saturday after Azalea's disappearance, a letter came to the Lee post office for Pa McBirney from Haystack Thompson. It read like this.

"Deer Nabor:

"How many wagons did the Sisson All Star Combinashun have when you saw them last? Adres me with the show.

C. W. Thompson."

Pa McBirney made use of the telegraph for the first time in his life, being moved to the act by the insistence of Mr. Carson. He responded briefly:

"There were three wagons. Why? Wire my expense."

And the answer came:

"Because now he's got two only. I am fiddling for the show."

"Good old Haystack!" cried Mr. Carson when he read the telegraphic message. And he himself ventured on a dispatch to Mr. Thompson.

"Keep on fiddling," he wired. "The third wagon will come back."

Then Mr. Carson rode home hard with the news to his Carin; and Mr. McBirney put his tired horses up the long mountain road to carry the word to his Mary. And Azalea's friends took heart, and hoped on and prayed on; and the sheriff made his more or less languid inquiries, and the newspapers printed articles, and hundreds of people who did not know Azalea at all were very much interested.

But all this was not greatly helping Azalea through the long days. They kept out of sight as much as possible — Betty Bowen and her odd "family." By creeping along old roads and only stopping at the most out-of-the-way villages they seemed to escape the curiosity of the people. Indeed, many of those they came across seemed not to have energy enough for anything so lively as curiosity. Azalea always had taken an interest in the world, and the best part of the old life had been, to her, the quiet journeys along the roads, with the glimpses they gave of farmhouses and cabins and little towns. Now that she had come to know so many warm-hearted new people, and that her own heart was

aglow with the remembrance of it all, her interest in the homes she passed was keener than ever. So long as she was allowed to sit where she could look out, she did not greatly mind the days. In spite of the constant watch kept over her, and of the fact that she had not dreamed it would be so long before she was restored to her friends, she would not be downcast, and it was only when Bet gave the word that they were to halt and go into camp for a day that the girl found life unendurable.

To be sure she grew very weary of going over and over the same thoughts; of wondering and wondering why no one came to her aid; of thinking what would happen to her when they had caught up with Sisson and his show. But when the dread and the fear were at their worst, she remembered certain words that Ma McBirney had spoken to her.

"No matter what comes to you, Azalea," she had told her once, "you keep your heart full of God's light and of God's love, and nothing can really harm you. You mind what I say, child. You do that and the angels of the Lord will compass you about."

If Betty Bowen had been her enemy she could

have broken the child's heart, or let her become exposed to some of those vague dangers which Azalea half imagined. But she was not her enemy. In her tired, discouraged way she seemed to like her. And she admired her. She used to command the child to sing and Azalea sang the sweet songs she had learned from Carin and from Ma McBirney.

They had crept up into the mountains by roundabout ways, and were now feeling their way toward the Sisson All Star Combination, the precise location of which they did not know. When Azalea learned that, in spite of herself, she began to feel anxious. Little by little the courage in her heart oozed out, leaving her a sad and trembling child. If the old-time wanderings with the show had been hateful to her when she was with her mother, she knew they would be much, much more so now that she was alone and unfriended. It is possible for children to feel black despair, and something like that came to Azalea. It was evident to her that her friends had failed to get on her track, and in the long, idle, sodden hours of thought, she decided that her escape depended on herself.

Little by little the watch set over her had

grown less strict. She had made no attempt to get away, and Betty and her son had come to count her in as a part of their company. They could not, indeed, imagine what would become of her should she leave them. Sour and bitter as their natures were, they really could not help liking this winsome girl, whose voice and manner seemed to speak to them day by day of better things than they had ever known. And liking her, they no doubt felt that she liked them. At least, as they traveled together, or made camp in some wild, beautiful mountain cove, or worked side by side around the camp fire, she gave no sign that was not friendly. Even Tige had come to watch her in a spirit of defense rather than of attack.

So one night when they had been sitting late before the camp fire, and she had gone into the tent to go to bed, she crept beneath the canvas at the rear and stole away through the woods. If it had not been for the crackling of the camp fire, she might have been overheard; and if it had not been for the growing weakness which kept poor weary Bet drowsing sleepily there before the blaze, her escape would soon have been discovered. But as it was, not even the alert

Tige had a hint of her going. He lay snoring and nuzzling before the fire, dimly aware that his master was near, and asking for no greater happiness. And that master sat there beside him, his head in his hands, thinking thoughts that for him were strange indeed. He had come back from a life of wandering and self-indulgence to prey upon his mother. She was a clever one — so he put it — and if she wanted him to keep out of mischief, let her find some way to care for him! But now, after these weeks in the company of the young girl who looked out at life with kind and trusting eyes, and who was polite even to the woman who kept her prisoner, Rafe began to see things in a different light. He had meant to torment that girl, and he had thought that he would have pleasure in doing it. But he had, someway, not been able to carry out his intention. She had seen through him — had believed in his good nature in spite of everything. And he knew now that he wanted to be the way she thought him. He wanted her to think of him as something besides a bully and jailer. He wished his mother were different from what she was; wished from the bottom of his heart that the two of them were something

better than wandering vagabonds. If they had lived in a proper house, if his father had not left them, if he could have had a sister like Azalea, he would have made a very different fellow of himself from what he was.

He wondered if, after all, it was too late. There were things he knew how to do. If his mother would give up this wandering and settle down in some quiet little place and keep Azalea with her, and if they could have really good things to eat, and a hearth to sit before rainy nights, and clothes that were decent and clean, why perhaps, after all, a fellow could "get shet" of the drinking of corn whiskey and the gambling and all. Rafe was young still, and the little kind angel of his better impulses had not all been slain by his black selfishness and his coarse appetites. So he sat and dreamed before the fire, and was somehow washed almost innocent again by the great sea of goodness that forever stretches about us, and in which we may, if we will, bathe and purify ourselves. The night and the stars, the wind and the fire were there to help him find himself. And while he dreamed, Azalea clipped on through the thick-growing laurel, skirted a little spring-fed pond,

and finding the wagon-road, fled down the mountain with feet that felt as light as feathers — as light as her heart. All of her courage had come rushing back. She said to herself that she would never be taken again — never. She was not going to have her life spoiled. It was her life and she meant to “run it” to suit herself. And as she fled, it seemed as if the little brown, thin hands of her dead mother were held out to help her; and as if the strong, kind hands of Ma McBirney were stretched in welcome; and the good, freckled hands of Jim and Hi beat together in encouragement.

Yes, they were patting “juba” for her, were Jim and Hi, and to the patter, patter, her feet sped on. She was not afraid of the night. She liked it. The stars saw what she was doing and were glad. The night bird that called out, kept the woods from being too solitary. The very wind was in her favor, and pushed at her back. Sometimes she stopped to rest, and she would have liked to sleep. But it seemed foolish to do that. The point now, was to get safe away.

“I was caught napping once,” she said to herself with a dry little laugh, “but I don’t mean to be again.”

Along toward morning she came on a little village — one she had not seen before. There was not a light anywhere, but the houses clustered together like comfortable sheep in the darkness, and she felt happier for being among them. Now that she was safe with these other human creatures, her weariness and sleepiness almost overcame her. It was growing chilly as the morning air quickened — though as yet there was no hint in the sky of coming light — and she shivered in her thin clothes. She still wore the white frock that had been so dainty and sweet the day of the Singing, but which was now a dusty rag. Her hat she had left behind her. The hair Ma McBirney had taught her to brush every night was full of the dust of the road. All of that pleasant cleanliness which she recently had been taught, had been of necessity lost in the life she had been leading. She felt ashamed as she thought how she would look to strangers, who probably would think her a miserable vagabond. However, her state could be remedied in time. Now the thing was to get in out of the cold; for she was drenched with sweat and her damp clothes clung to her.

She turned into one of the little yards, and

going around to the rear of the house, tried the handle of a shed door. It yielded, and she stepped into a dark little room smelling of firewood. At the far side was an open door, and she groped her way to it and stood on a little framed-in porch with wire netting on the one exposed side. And there, neatly made, was a cot bed, waiting, it seemed, for some weary child to crawl in between its warm blankets. Azalea took off her worn and dusty shoes and her disgraceful frock, and stretched herself between the comforts. The next moment she was sound asleep.

* * * * *

A few hours later, the Sisson All Star Combination, rattling down the mountain side, came upon the wagon and the tent of Betty Bowen, ranged side by side in a comfortable little pocket away back from the road — the same road that Azalea had taken a mile lower down, after her hurried taking of the short cuts.

Sisson greeted the encampment with a whoop, and brought Rafe, shock-headed and heavy-eyed, from his bed of straw in the wagon.

“Well,” said Sisson, “you ain’t getting up early to hang out the wash, be you? Where’s Bet? Where’s the girl?”

Rafe pointed at the tent with his thumb.

"In there, I reckon. We all sat late last night around the fire."

"Huh! Mighty social, ain't you? Had any trouble with that girl?"

Rafe frowned and shook his head.

"Well, get 'em out of the tall grass," commanded Sisson. "I want to see 'em."

Rafe went to the tent door and called, but Bet was sleeping heavily, and her son, looking at her jaded face, hesitated to arouse her. It was Azalea whom Sisson wanted to see, and Rafe said to himself that Sisson would have to treat her well, or there would be trouble. He could see the girl's bed bunched up as if she were rolled underneath the bed clothes, but when he called there was no answer, and at last, half frightened, he went over to awaken her. But when he got closer he discovered there was no one in the bed. The clothes were tossed up as if some one lay there, and he saw at a glance that they had been purposely made to look that way. For a minute his heart sank; and then, suddenly, with a strange new unselfishness, it lightened. Azalea had slipped from Sisson's clutches after all. Rafe drew his belt a

little tighter, pushed his hat on the back of his head, and going out, faced the company.

"The girl's lit out," he said briefly.

"What?" screamed Sisson. And before Rafe could say more, a man — the tallest, it seemed to Rafe, that he ever had set his eyes upon, came stalking around from behind one of the wagons. He was hatless, and revealed a startling shock of hair, and underneath his arm he carried a fiddle in its case.

"What you say, you speckled cub?" he roared.

"The girl's lit out," Rafe repeated. He grinned at them cheerfully, and was still grinning as Sisson advanced with fight in his eye.

"Ain't you onto your job any better than that?" he yelled, still coming on. Rafe looked almost languid as he watched him, but just as Sisson got ready for a rush at him, the great arm of the young mountaineer shot forward, striking his "boss" cleanly between the eyes. And down in the dust went the head of the Sisson All Star Combination. Every one except the man with the violin laughed. He seemed hardly to have noticed Sisson's downfall. He turned his pierc-

ing eyes on the young man and said in a voice as cold and keen as a sword-edge:

"Tell me where the girl is."

That new, strange gathering of little good angels conspired again to make Rafe answer:

"I don't know, sir. She went into that tent last night. That's the last I seen of her. I didn't set the dog to watch last night — I got tired of treating that little thing like she was a convict. So she's slipped away."

Something very like applause came from the All Stars, and it grew a little louder as Bet, having been awakened by the noise, appeared at the door. They were giving her credit, she understood, for having connived at the child's escape.

"But she may be near at hand," continued the man with the fiddle.

"I reckon not, sir. Her bed was fixed up to look like she was in it. She's lit out all right."

"Then I'll do the same," said Haystack Thompson. He reached in one of the wagons and drew out a few clothes tied in a square of homespun. "So long, folks," he said. "Hope you'll enjoy yourselves."

The All Stars stared and forgot their manners, so that "Haystack" had to make his way

on down the mountain with no one to say good-bye.

"So he was spying out the girl the whole time!" said they to each other.

But what they thought or knew was of no consequence to Haystack now. He swung on down the road, peering here and there, and hallooing at the top of his lungs every few minutes.

"Zalie! Zalie McBirney!" he shouted. "Where you hiding? This is ole Haystack come to take you home. Don't be afeard, Zalie. Answer up, that's a good girl."

But no answer came; and a couple of hours later when he had reached the contented little town of Barrington, he went to the telegraph office and with the help of the obliging young operator sent this message to Mr. Carson.

"Found the third wagon, but not the girl. Search party going out to-day."

CHAPTER XI

THE SUMMERS FAMILY

The Rev. Mr. Absalom Summers, pastor of the Methodist church at Barrington, N. C., got up out of his bed singing. He went to his bath singing, and singing he hastened to the kitchen to build the fire for breakfast.

"A mighty fortress is our Lord," he shouted to the clear, bright morning.

"A bulwark nev-ev-er fail-ll-ing."

He did not even stop singing when he knocked his head against the shed door. Indeed, he would have felt a little lonesome if he had not hit it against that jamb, for that battering of his blond head was a part, so to speak of the morning ritual. He loomed six feet three in his knitted hose, and as the door was only six feet in height, difficulties of one sort or another were unavoidable. As yet, the door casing had resisted all attacks. All the Rev. Absalom said was "Ouch! Giminy cricket!" And then with increased vigor he continued:

“Our helper he, amid the flood
Of mortal ills pre-vail-ll-ing.
For still our ancient foe,
Doth seek to work us woe — ”

The song died — not on the lips of the reverend gentleman, for to say that he sang with his lips would be to do him an injustice. The song died in his resounding throat and his massive lungs, it faded away in his deep diaphragm, and he stood frankly gasping.

The morning being so fair, it had called to him, and even with his arms laden with good “light wood,” he could not resist the temptation to step out on the little porch to look at the lacy clouds winding over an azure sky, and the delicate scarfs of mist fluttering from the shoulders of the mountains. And then he saw just what papa bear and mamma bear and baby bear saw when they came back to their home. He saw Golden-locks, or rather Hazel-locks, asleep in the little couch. She was smiling as if she were dreaming of happy things, but for all of that she looked very worn and uncared for. The shoes that stood beside the cot had almost no soles to them, and the soiled white frock that lay

tumbled at the foot of the bed, was a mere rag. Her long hair was uncared for, and the deep rings beneath her eyes were not all from fatigue.

"Well," said he under his breath, "the poor little thrush — the little storm-blown thrush!"

And then he rushed away, because he felt a great need upon him, which was to tell his wife Barbara what had happened. It was nothing less than a pain to him to know anything that Barbara did not know. So he emptied his arms of the wood, and dashed back to the bedroom.

"Come!" he commanded. "Come!" His greenish eyes were shining with the loving light that was almost always to be seen in them, his face, as quick with expressions as an actor's, was literally beaming, and he was gesticulating with his large hands. "Just come, mamma, quick," he pleaded. "Please don't stop to do your hair."

"Me go too! Me go too!" piped the insistent, high-pitched voice of the young person in the cradle. So without more ado, the Rev. Absalom gathered his son in his arms, and the three Summers made an excursion to the back porch. There they stood — at least there two of them stood, and there the third, safe under his dad's arm, wriggled — and looked at the little

forlorn, sleeping beauty. Then, because Mrs. Barbara had a way of finding the right word, she sighed happily:

"How winsome!" And then: "How forlorn!"

"Clean beat out," agreed the Rev. Absalom. Barbara put a finger on her lips.

"Let her sleep," she said. "She shall sleep as long as she can, and after that, we'll see what's to be done. Best lock the shed door, dear, so she can't get away without our knowing it. She might be frightened, you know."

Her husband smiled his broadest smile.

"I don't believe she'd be very much frightened," he said. "She's got too much sense. Now, if I was lost, or had run away from home, I'd never have the sense to nose out a bed and get into it. Not I. I'd be lying out in the rain groaning and sighing."

"Yes, I see you groaning and sighing," retorted his wife, pinching his arm as she took the baby from him. "You'd take a crowbar and break in the front door of the first house you came to, and then you'd bless all the people in the house and crawl in the best bed and go to sleep."

She ran with the baby in her arms, away from his pretended anger, and he turned his attention once more to the kitchen fire, singing under his breath:

“And though this world with demons filled,
Should threaten to undo-oo-oo us —”

The world might be filled with demons, but it was quite evident that they had not succeeded in breaking into the house of the Rev. Absalom Summers. They had not put their clutches on his little brown wife nor on his golden-haired baby son. They were not in the bright little kitchen, where she hastily prepared the morning meal, and they did not sit down at the table with the family while the head of the house said grace in clear and decisive tones which could leave no chance for any inattention on the part of Providence.

“Oh, dear Master of the World and of this little house,” prayed the good man, “we thank Thee for this bright morning and for the flowers and clouds and birds which have helped to make it beautiful. We thank Thee that we, here beneath this roof, love each other with whole hearts. We thank Thee for the little child that sits here at our board, and for his health and

smiles, and from the bottom of our hearts we pray Thee to give us wisdom to lead him in the paths of goodness. And we thank Thee for the little wanderer who sleeps a stranger in our house. If she be motherless, give us joy in mothering her; and if she be fatherless, we commit her to Thy all knowing care — beg for her Thy abounding love and mercy. May no fear come in her heart when first she looks upon us. May she see at once the tenderness we feel for her. And if it be Thy will that she shall unite her life with ours, may we have heart of grace to take her as a gift from Thee. Amen.”

“Amen,” breathed Mrs. Barbara, wiping her eyes.

“Amen,” laughed baby Jonathan.

And then they all fell to and ate with the best of appetites.

Then, while they lingered over their meal, and the Rev. Absalom talked about the ride he ought to take to Sessions to see old Mrs. Underwood, who had cancer, and while Mrs. Barbara decided that perhaps she'd better not start her blue chally that day when she was likely to have so much on her mind, and while baby Jonathan was wondering when, *when* he would be let

down on the floor to crawl after that nice hairy caterpillar, there came a great knocking at the door.

"Old Bill Jones!" cried the preacher. "What a fist the man has! Who can it be, Barbara?" It was no easy matter for the master of the house to uncoil his long legs and get them out from under the table. So it was little Mrs. Barbara who opened the door to admit a man quite as tall as her own Absalom — a man with no hat and a great shock of hair, and a fiddle under his arm. He nodded to Mrs. Summers, but looked over her head at the man and shouted:

"Neighbor, I'm getting up a posse to hunt a little girl that's been lost. It's mighty important that we get under way inside of an hour at the farthest. Will you join us?"

"Now you just make up your mind I will, man. But first I want to know why she's lost, and who wants her, and what's to be done with her after she's found. I've known of cases where it was better to be lost than found. What say?"

"I say what you say is true, sir! It would be a heap better for that there little girl to die on the mountains alone than to be picked up by the

folks she's run away from. But I don't want them to get her, and I don't want her to die on the mountain side, for there's happiness a-coming to her if only I can put my hands on her and take her back to them that's waiting for her."

Mr. Summers was at last untangled from the table and he came forward holding out that great hearty hand which had put faith and hope into many weary hearts.

"Now, neighbor, you do me the honor to enter and be seated, if you please. I want to get the rights of this story before I do anything. And don't think you're wasting time, for I give you my word that you're saving it, and that as soon as I find this is a thing we all ought to enlist in, I'll have the whole town about us — bay-ing at our heels, sir — and it will be view and halloo with us."

Haystack Thompson shifted his violin to his other arm, and ran a long tongue over his lips. Then he looked over his man.

"You the preacher?" he asked.

"Right you are."

He came in then, and at Mrs. Summer's invitation to draw his chair up to the breakfast table, did so, and ate while he told his story. From

time to time the Rev. Absalom consulted his wife Barbara. He had a way of lifting an eyebrow or half closing an eye, that was a code of signals in itself; and she had her own swift ways of answering. So that by the time Haystack was through with his story, both Mr. and Mrs. Summers had decided what to do.

"You show him," said Mr. Summers. So Mrs. Barbara arose and beckoned their visitor.

"There's no need of a searching party, sir," she said. "Come see what we found this morning."

And then, just as the two of them stepped out onto the porch, Azalea opened her weary eyes and blinked at the light.

"Well, praise the Lord!" broke from Haystack's lips when he saw her.

"Amen!" shouted the Rev. Absalom, and in spite of some effort to restrain himself he broke out with:

"The Prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell-h-h him."

Azalea sat up on her cot with the bedclothes drawn up to her chin, and stared about her with eyes too full of surprise to be troubled. Then, with a rush, she comprehended.

"Oh, Mr. Thompson, dear!" she gasped. "Is it really you? Oh, Mr. Thompson!" She forgot her uncovered arms and her straggling hair, and sprang from her couch into the old fiddler's outstretched arms, and wept. It was not a mere summer shower, but a cloudburst—a freshet. And Haystack Thompson wept too, and mopped his eyes on his red bandana; and the Rev. Absalom Summers mopped his on the roller towel; and little Mrs. Summers dried hers delicately on the hem of the baby's frock. But, however, it became necessary to bring all this to an end, and Haystack found the courage to do it. He set the little girl down firmly in a chair and shook a warning finger at her.

"Storm's all over!" he announced; and he helped Mrs. Summers to wrap her pink knitted shawl around the girl's shoulders.

"I'm off," he announced, "to send word to the folks at home."

"And I'm with you," declared the preacher. Mrs. Summers ran to the window to see the

two tall men making their way down the street, and then hastened back to her strange guest. Azalea had arisen and came forward with the pink shawl dragging behind her.

"Oh, ma'am," she pleaded, both hands extended, "Please don't think me bold and horrid. I'm not bold, honest I'm not. I want to tell you all about it."

"I know all about it now, my dear, and I understand everything. I don't think you are bold, and I'm very thankful that you came here. And now, my child, you will find some clean clothes laid out on the bed — for you and I are just about of a size, though I'm a married person and you're a little girl. And here's a glass of milk to go on, so to speak, while you are making yourself fine. By the time you are ready, there'll be more porridge cooked for you. You like porridge, don't you — with cream? And do you like muffins with raisins in them? I can cook some in no time. And bacon — shall it be bacon — and a few fried potatoes?"

But Azalea had fled to make her toilet. It was, after all, not so quickly made as she might have hoped. As she stood in the simple, dainty room, with the pretty toilet table and the deli-

cately perfumed soap and the great soft towels, all her longing for the cleanliness of the Ma McBirney days came over her, and when she emerged, at last, the muffins were as brown as nuts on top, and the bacon was done to a crisp.

"Well!" cried Mrs. Summers when she saw the girl in her starched pink gingham, with smooth braids and "shining morning face" standing in the doorway. "Well!" The word seemed to mean much. It meant among other things that Mrs. Barbara liked the looks of her unexpected guest, and Azalea felt a pleasant wave of "homeyness" gently rippling over her.

"And now for breakfast," said little Mrs. Barbara. But at that moment Azalea saw what she thought was the sweetest thing her eyes ever had beheld. Baby Jonathan was in his tub down before the fire, and he was splashing with hands and feet till the water flew all about him on the blue oilcloth.

"Oh, the little deary dear!" squealed Azalea, forgetting all about breakfast and dropping on her knees beside the rosy baby. "Oh, the little lovey, ducky, honey-pot!" She dropped a kiss at the back of his neck, and then deposited one in each of his moist, rosy palms. She twisted his

golden, silk-fine ringlets about her finger, and counted his toes and his fingers to the immortal rhyme of the little pig that went to market.

"But, my dear," protested the baby's mother, "your breakfast is getting cold."

"Oh, I know, Mrs. Summers. But I like it cold. I do, really, ma'am. And then I've had ever so many breakfasts — Oh, ever and ever so many in my time. But I never saw a baby before, close too, and like this. I didn't know they were so sweet. Why, he's the very loveliest thing I ever saw. Are all babies as nice as this one?"

Mrs. Barbara beamed, and her dark eyes looked deeper and sweeter than ever.

"Well, I don't think there are any *quite* as nice," she said blushing beautifully. "But so far as I've seen they're all more or less nice."

"I should think everybody would have 'em!" cried Azalea. "I certainly shall."

"I would," said little Mrs. Barbara tenderly. "And now come, you starved child, and eat your breakfast."

While Azalea ate, she and Mrs. Summers exchanged confidences. Azalea told her the full story of her "strange life" as she called it; and

Mrs. Summers told her about her happy girlhood, and her days away at boarding school, and how her parents had wished her to marry a young man who lived near them, and whom she had known all her life, and who was rich and of high social position, and how she had just *had* to marry Absalom Summers who had no money, and who didn't know — or care — what you meant when you talked about a social position.

"And I'm so happy," said the clergyman's little wife, "in this dear funny little house —"

"And with that dear funny little baby," broke in Azalea.

"That I really can't be thankful enough," concluded Mrs. Summers.

"Well," said Azalea, "you'd be surprised if you could know of the perfectly lovely people I've been meeting these days."

"Not Bet Bowen and her son?" teased Mrs. Summers.

Azalea flushed a little. "But really and truly, they had their good side, Mrs. Summers," she said earnestly. "They weren't half as bad to me as they might have been."

"You dear child! I'm sure they weren't. And

perhaps in their hearts they are glad you got away."

Azalea clasped her hands and swung them up over her head with a curious, excited gesture. "You can make up your mind that I'm glad, Mrs. Summers. Just think, I'm really free again, and I'm going back to Ma McBirney, and Carin and all the rest."

The baby had been taken from its bath and clothed in fresh garments, and now its mother made herself comfortable in a low rocking chair, and drew the fuzzy head against her shoulder.

"I'm going to rock him to sleep," she explained. "So we'll have to stop talking a while."

Azalea smiled till all of her teeth gleamed.

"I'll try," she said, "but I know it will be hard. Honest, I never talked so much before in my life. I've always been afraid of people a little, or thought it wasn't polite to talk like this. But someway—you don't mind my saying it, do you, Mrs. Summers?—you seem almost like my own sister. I couldn't *help* talking to you. You may be married and older than I am, but

you're no bigger. And then you've been so good — so good I couldn't say."

"Sh, dear," murmured the little mother. And she crooned the baby to sleep while the girl, sitting on a hassock near, watched her with admiring eyes.

Then, when baby was quiet, the two worked together about the little house till all was tidy and as it should be, and little Mrs. Summers made her confession too.

"I get dreadfully lonely at times," she said. "The people here are good as good can be, but they're different from the people I'm used to. I can't seem to make myself feel quite free with them. Why, I've told you more, Azalea, than I have them, and I've only known you such a little, little few minutes."

"It's queer, isn't it?" said Azalea softly. "It's very queer. I know this: I'll have you for my kin as long as I live. You see I've no real kin, so we'll be pretend kin."

"Cousins!" cried Mrs. Barbara. "Make it cousins!"

"Cousins!" cried Azalea in turn. And they smiled at each other from across the bed that they were making together.

So Haystack Thompson, still somewhat troubled and flustered, came back to find his charge as happy as a bird. And it was arranged that they should take the train for Lee that afternoon.

"You're to wear the things you have on, Azalea," said Mrs. Summers. "And my blue sunshade, and you can send them back to me when you get ready. I've ten times as many clothes as I have any occasion to wear here."

But there were still several hours that these so sudden friends could spend together; so Azalea was shown the garden and the chickens and the cow and the one lazy white horse, and she was present when Jonathan awoke. She saw him dewy from his sleep, and thought him lovelier than ever. So it was not quite easy to say good-bye when the time came. But it was agreed that Mrs. Summers was to write to Azalea and that Azalea was to answer, and that they were to address each other as "My dear Cousin."

The four o'clock train bore Haystack Thompson and Azalea away from the little huddled town and up through the purple mountains, and dropped them, after hours of unexpected delay, down into the village of Lee.

CHAPTER XII

MA SAYS NO

Ma McBirney, sitting sad-eyed at the edge of the mountain plateau on which her cottage stood, was absently watching the road. She had no reason to suppose that anybody would be winding up that five-mile wagonway to see her, yet for some reason she could not fix her mind on her work that morning. Sitting there at the "Outlook," she could see over the bright valley and catch the gleam of the sun on the river and on the distant dome of the county courthouse.

About her the bees hummed, intent on their day's work; and not far distant stood the buzzing village of hives which Thomas McBirney had placed where the Pride of India tree, the mimosas and catalpas, the trumpet flower and wild honeysuckle could feed them. Mary McBirney loved the song of the bees; she loved the bright valley; she loved her home and most of all she loved those within it.

Yet to-day the heart in her was heavy. A

sorrow less black yet somehow more disheartening than that which had engulfed her at the time of her Molly's death, rested upon her heart. When Molly had died, it was as if the tragic blackness of night had come upon her. Yet amid this murk there came shining the morning star of hope. And afterward there came the full and beautiful dawn of perfect trust. She believed that in the Time to Come she and Molly would stand together, spirit to spirit, and that there would be no more separation.

Then Azalea had come to fill the lonely hours with her bright ways, and every night Mary McBirney had thanked God for her daughterly society. And now she was gone! Nor could the woman who had grown to love her, rest in the comfort that she was, like Molly, safe from harm. When Molly died, her mother's grief had been selfish. She did not mourn for Molly, but for herself. But now she mourned most for the lost girl, who might be going through terrible experiences, and who was, no doubt, eating out her heart in terror and homesickness.

There were not wanting those who said — and believed — that the "circus girl" had run away of her own accord and gone back to the wander-

ing folk with whom she had spent the greater part of her life. But never for one fleeting second did Ma McBirney think this. She had looked too often into the clear and loving eyes of the girl, to believe that there could be anything about her which was not straightforward and loyal. She only prayed that in some way her love might reach out, as starlight reaches from stars, to shine on the poor wandering child and comfort her.

She could see her Thomas working on his terraced, steep fields, and now and then she waved a hand to him. She didn't want him to know how heavily her heart lay in her. She had caused him enough anxiety during the past year, and she knew his own heart was sore with the loss of his Molly, and that he also was greatly distressed over Azalea. So, not to add to his troubles, she tried to wear a cheerful face. But this morning her knees seemed to give way under her, and her pulse fluttered sickeningly.

Then, as she sat there reproaching herself for not having more faith that her eager prayers would be answered, she saw three riders coming up the long road. They showed in the midst of a little clearing and then were lost among the

trees, and only now and then, at some bald, out-jutting point, could she catch a glimpse of them. After a time she made out that they were a man, a woman and a girl; and when they were still far beneath her, she recognized them for Mr. and Mrs. Carson and Carin.

She threw a thought to the cabin and the way it looked, and decided that nothing was out of place. All was as orderly and clean as hands could make it, and up in Azalea's empty room, there were fresh flowers in the vase, and the canary bird was singing on the little high-swung gallery. As for Ma McBirney herself, she always was neat. Her hair rippled away from her broad, low brow, and her plain gingham frock, with its crocheted collar and its branched coral brooch, was as clean and smooth as it could be made. So, unflurried as ever — though she had never before received people so important — Mrs. McBirney awaited her guests.

The three of them, having achieved the last climb on their way, urged their horses to a fine gallop, and they came bearing down tumultuously on Mary McBirney, crying out something joyously. Then, suddenly she forgot all

her dignity and ran to meet them, and as they reined up sharply by her side the tears were streaming over her face.

"What say? What say?" she shrilled at them. "Is she found!"

"Found! Whoop la!" shouted Mr. Carson like a boy. "Found by Haystack Thompson. She's all safe and right—safe and right as Carin here. And they're coming home on the afternoon train."

"Oh," gasped Mrs. McBirney, and sank down on a convenient stump and stared in the distance, the unheeded tears still running down her cheeks. And then rousing herself she cried: "But the boys must know! Pa must know!"

"Where are they all?"

"Pa's cultivating the cotton patch yon; and Hi's fishing—it don't take but one arm to fish, you know. And Jim's off at school."

"Count Jim out, then, Mrs. McBirney. Shall I go call the others?"

"Wait. I've a way," cried Mrs. McBirney, and sped toward the house. There she kept an old horn hanging. It had come down in the family from Revolutionary times; it had been used to call the men in from the fields, when the

hostile Indians showed their feathered heads above the pass, and now it blew its good tidings over the fields.

"That will bring them," said Mrs. McBirney. "They'll come running."

The Carsons said they would sit out in the sunshine — that there was no need for them to go into the house. They had come up unexpectedly, and they gave Mary McBirney a chance to keep her house to herself if she wished. But a kind of humble pride swelled in the good woman's heart. She had not many vanities, but her pride in her home was one of them.

"We will sit in the sun," she said, "for it's the place to be days like this. But first you must see my home. I've seen yours, you know."

So they were shown the homely rooms — the rooms where each and every member of the family had his comfortable place. They saw the cat sunning on the doorstep, and the hounds stretched out in the yard. They saw the braided rugs, the woven counterpanes, the homemade cotton at the windows, the shapely baskets, all the products of Mary McBirney's busy hands.

And then they were taken to that clean little

chamber, looking straight up the leafy mountain side, which the McBirneys had lovingly made for Azalea.

"Oh!" cried Carin, "Isn't it a dear place, mamma? Quaint and dear like Azalea! My room has too many things in it, hasn't it mamma? I like this better. And it's almost like living in the tree tops. The next time Azalea leaves you, Mrs. McBirney, it will be because she thinks she's a bird and flies away. Or else she'll be a flying squirrel."

And just then they heard Thomas McBirney calling them from below. Then they all went down to have a part in telling their good news, and while they were in the very midst of their story — not that they had much to tell, for they knew no more than Haystack's message had brought them — Hi's odd little figure, with its long arms and bullet head, came crawling up the rocks from the lower waterfall. His dark face was strangely old and tired, and as he moved forward, with one of his thin arms in a splint, he certainly looked like a neglected boy, and this in spite of all that Ma McBirney could do to keep him as she thought a boy should be kept.

"She's found, Hi," Mr. Carson shouted in his hearty way. "Azalea is found!"

"Honest, sir?" cried Hi, stumbling forward. "Honest?"

"Honest Injun, hope to die!" roared back Mr. Carson.

Hi began kicking viciously at the dirt and twisting his body this way and that. He was in agony for fear he would "boo hoo," as he put it to himself.

"Sap head!" he snarled under his breath, "Mammy's baby boy!" He was calling himself names, and to some effect, for the invisible hand that had clutched his throat seemed to relax.

"Well," said Mr. Carson, "let's go sit out there on the headland and talk. We rode up here to-day not only to tell you this perfectly gorgeous piece of news, but also to talk over certain matters with you."

"I'm sure we're pleased to listen to anything you have to say, sir," replied Thomas McBirney quaintly. So they seated themselves on the benches at "Outlook Point."

"We are so," murmured Ma McBirney in her soft voice.

"Won't you begin at the beginning, Lucy?" said Mr. Carson to his wife. "Tell them how we came to leave the city and our friends and all, and settle here. Or shall I tell them, dear?"

Mrs. Carson leaned back against the trunk of a tulip tree and looked off across the valley.

"It was a great sorrow," she said in her weary, beautiful way. "It was a sorrow so great that we never could quite believe it." She spoke slowly, with a little pause between each word. "In one day our three sons were taken from us. It was at a theatre — there was a fire — I never talk of it. I cannot. We have traveled; we have lived here and there, and we have been unable to get back our strength and interest. My Charles —" she laid her white hand on her husband's knee — "tries to make out that he has. But I know better. But he's more unselfish than I, that's all. Sometimes I've shut myself up for weeks at a time, and seen no one except my nurse. It was the only way that I could control myself. Well, not to talk of that, we have come, naturally enough, to look at life in a very different way from what we used to look at it. We see that we've got to stop living for ourselves alone. If we're to be happy again, we must

enlarge our family. We must take in everyone we can reach who needs us, or who will care for us. So we have come down here where every one seems simple and friendly, and where we can offer our neighborly offices, to spend the next few years. We heard of the fine old Ather-ton place, and finding that it was for sale, we bought it and have made a home there which we really are coming to love, though we had thought we never could really care for a home again. And now we want to be doing something — something really interesting."

"We want to play a new game," broke in Mr. Carson, "and to get as many as we can to come and play with us."

"We want," went on Mrs. Carson, "to go into these mountain industries. We want the old handicrafts to be revived; the weaving, the basket making and the pottery. And we want your help and advice."

"Oh, yes'm," cried Mary McBirney enthusiastically. "Thomas and I have talked many and many's the time, of the good that might come from such a thing. Why, there's chair makers in these parts that can make a chair

that'll go down to their great-great-grandchildren."

"Just the thing, just the thing, madam!" answered Mr. Carson. "They've got the knowledge, and they've the talent, but they don't use their knowledge sufficiently, and they don't understand how to market their wares."

"It's true," Mr. McBirney admitted. "They're poorer than Job's turkey. They just set around and mourn their fate. They stir up a little patch of ground, and think they've done everything there is to be done."

"They're too far from markets and railroads," said Mr. Carson. "In the beginning the mountains called them, they were so beautiful; and then they cast a spell over them. It's as if the people were hypnotized, and hadn't leave to move."

"That's it," agreed Mrs. McBirney. "You see them creeping down into town as shy as deer. And you can tell by looking at them, that there ain't enough in the pantry to go around. They're just plumb starved, that's what they are."

"Starved for lack of food, and society, and excitement," Mr. Carson added. "Their

stomachs and their minds and hearts are empty."

"Yes, sir, just plumb empty."

"Well, let's put something in them. What do you say, Mr. McBirney?"

"It certainly would be a fine thing to do, sir. Now, how'll you go about it?"

"Well, we want you and Mrs. McBirney to co-operate with us. We want you to take charge of the chair factory that we mean to start, and we want Mrs. McBirney to preside over the weaving."

"And leave the farm, sir?" cried Mary McBirney. "You're not ever meaning that, are you?"

"Why, would that be so hard? We'd put you up just the sort of cottage you want, you know. And you'd be near the school, so that Jim could go without using up the best part of his energy racing up and down the mountain."

"I reckon Jimmy does get rather wore out," Mary McBirney mused. "And maybe it would be better all 'round, Mr. Carson. And yet —"

Mary McBirney's eyes strayed off to the purple valley with its silver streams; they rested on the low-lying cottage, wreathed in its flowering vines and hemmed around with its rose bushes,

its sweet althea shrubs, its hydrangeas and bridal wreaths; they rested on the Pride of India tree and the graves beneath; on the towering tulip trees under which they sat, and she shook her head.

"No, Mr. Carson," she said gently and with the moisture gathering in her eyes, "we couldn't never make another place so—so sweet—as this here one. We couldn't put our hearts into another place as we have into this. Besides, though I thank you kindly, sir, I wouldn't want to leave my home to work outside. My job is making things bright for Thomas and Jim and Azalea, and perhaps for Hi, here. If it was so that I really needed to work outside, of course I would and never say a word. But I'd rather we got along with little, and went patched and mended, than for us to have more and lose the feeling of home."

"I can't say the farm has paid any too well," Thomas McBirney said, "Sometimes it certainly has been hard scratching. And yet, somehow, I wouldn't like to cut loose from it. It's such a likely prospect we have here." He too was looking off at the valley. "Somehow it don't seem as if we could move on. Perhaps the

mountains *have* cast a spell over us, as you say."

"Well, I can't blame you if they have," said Mr. Carson cordially. "Yet ought you to let sentiment like that stand in the way of Jim's schooling and your advancement?"

Thomas McBirney crossed one leg over the other, and looked down pensively at his caloused hands.

"I don't know as I had ought to," he said slowly. "But after all, we're happy here. The children was born here. Our little girl—Molly, you know, that's dead—she seems to be running over the place still. Seems like I can feel her near me, plenty of times. Don't you feel that way, ma?"

Mary McBirney nodded, with her tender smile.

"So," went on Thomas McBirney, "I don't know as I ought to leave. But I tell you what I can do, Mr. Carson, and what I'd be proud to do. Times when I wasn't busy here at the farm, I could drive back into the mountains to visit men I know, and men I don't exactly know but that I've heard tell of, and I could get them to working on chairs for you. Then they'd haul them down to your place; and maybe some of

them who ain't as hard to pry loose from the rocks as I be, will move down beside your factory."

"Thomas makes the best chairs I ever set in," declared Mary McBirney with pride. "Talk about getting other men to make chairs! There ain't none of them can come up to him."

"I engage your whole output then," declared Mr. Carson, apparently not at all vexed that his fine plan had been disarranged. "Get to work, Mr. McBirney, and get your boy to work. I'll sell the chairs for you at better rates than you ever dreamed of."

"And if you do that," declared Thomas McBirney, "you'll take your commission. This has got to be on a business basis, sir."

"Of course, of course," answered Mr. Carson hastily. He saw that it would be very easy to hurt the pride of this independent man. "We'll agree on the commission, and I'll take it. Of course I shall need money to build my cottages and to run the business."

Hi had been wriggling like a worm on the bench where he sat beside Carin, and now, with much blinking and twisting, he managed to say, addressing himself to Mr. Carson:

"Please, sir!"

"Yes, Hi."

"My ma, you know," but his cogs stopped again.

"Well, I don't exactly know her, Hi, but I'd like to."

"She can weave, sir, better than anybody. She can weave the Tudor Rose, and the Andrew Jackson Cabin, and the Diamond and Cat Track — Oh, most anything. You ought to see her weaving. And she can make her own dyes, just beautiful. But what's the use? Where she lives nobody cares about her weaving. If you'd just ask her to come on, sir, since Mrs. McBirney don't want to, she'd run the place for you, fine, and teach the women all the old patterns."

His little black eyes seemed to hold flames in them as he turned his face, twitching with his excitement, toward Mr. Carson.

"Why, Hi, could she really? Where does she live? I can go and see her."

"She lives away over on the far side of Steamboat Mountain, sir. Pa's dead, you know, and there's three children for ma to care for. She drives the horse to town and gets washing, and she farms a little. But it ain't much. I

had to leave home so's I'd not be making her feed me. That's why I went away with my uncle Sisson." His face flushed scarlet through all the brown as he thought of his connection with this man whom he hated, and whom he knew all these people with him held in contempt.

"You shall go with me, Hi, and show me the way. We go by train, of course?"

"By train first. Then we drive." Little drops of sweat broke out on Hi's forehead and about his mouth and the tears swam into his hot eyes.

"Oh, if we could be together, here, sir! I just want to see my ma so! I've been wanting to see her all the time, and now since my arm got broke I can't hardly *live*, I want her so."

Mary McBirney reached out a hand and drew the boy over beside her. He might have been ashamed of her petting at another moment, but now he nestled up close to her, big boy that he was, and looked shyly up into her face.

"It was being with you, ma'am," he murmured, "that made me so homesick, I reckon. It made me remember what ma was like."

Mrs. Carson leaned forward to smile on him.

"We'll have you and your mother together, Hi," she declared, the languor gone out of her lovely voice, "one way or another. You may take my word for that. And if, as you say, she can attend to the weaving, why you may be sure she shall be given it to do. We can get some one to help her keep her house and care for the children. I agree with Mrs. McBirney, a mother has to make a happy home. That's her first business — and her best business, too, isn't it? But since your mother has to have the work outside in order to have a home, we'll arrange the best we can."

"I shall learn how to weave, too, mother," Carin announced. "O mother, can't I have that big room upstairs for a studio? I want to put my sketches up on the wall, and have a place to paint. Please, mother! I'd be so happy if I could have a studio of my own. If everyone else is to do something, I want to do something too. And I know I can paint. And I know I can weave. And I can make baskets. I have the *dearest* ideas for shapes and designs. Oh, I'd so much rather do that than study arithmetic and grammar."

"Perhaps there'll be time for both, my dear,"

smiled her mother. "There seems to be a great deal of time down here. I'm having a friend of mine come down to act as governess for Carin," Mrs. Carson said, turning to Mrs. McBirney. "She will teach her at home for the present, for I don't feel as if I could let her go away to boarding school yet. Fortunately, my friend, Miss Parkhurst, paints charmingly in water colors, and so Carin will be able to take some lessons in that. Carin wants to make an artist of herself, and I'm sure I'd love to have her if she really has the talent. Well, come, Charles, we must be riding down the mountain. Will you meet Azalea this afternoon, Mr. McBirney?"

"You just believe I will, ma'am," declared Thomas McBirney, going forward to hold Mrs. Carson's horse for her. "And it will be as happy an errand as I ever took, ma'am."

"We'll be pleased to see you often, ma'am," said Mrs. McBirney in her quaint way, as she stood beside Mrs. Carson's beautiful white mare, looking up into the delicate, lovely face of the woman above her. "It's a great privilege for me to know you, ma'am."

"It's one of the best things that has come to

me to know you, Mary McBirney," responded the other, leaning down to grasp the firm hand of her new friend. "I feel warmed all over when I'm with you. And I'm so glad you've decided to keep inside your home. I'm even glad that your husband has made up his mind to stay up here on the mountain, though I must confess that it sets back our plans a little. But it will all come out all right. We'll find some one who needs to come. As for you — I mean 'you-all' —" she laughed lightly, "as you say, you're better right here in this beautiful spot. Let me come often, will you?"

"Come as often as you can, ma'am. It certainly will make me thankful to have you." Mary McBirney spoke from the heart. Idle compliments were not in her line. She was offering her friendship, and Mrs. Carson, who had known brilliant and charming women and had had their devotion in plenty, felt her heart swell with satisfaction. She had known lovely women, but never one in whose eyes the lights of home seemed to glow as they did in Mary McBirney's.

Good-byes were said by all save Hi. He, it seemed, was not to be found. He had slipped

away in his own fashion, and at that moment he lay on the red pine needles back of the cabin, "just bawling," as he would have phrased it.

He was astonished at himself, and thoroughly disgusted. He remembered that during all of his troubles, when Sisson beat him, when he went hungry, when he lay out in the wet, he had not once "bawled." It seemed perfectly disgusting that he should be doing it now when everything was coming all right.

CHAPTER XIII

AT HOME AGAIN

At four o'clock that afternoon, at which time the train bearing Mr. Thompson and Azalea was due at Lee, Ma McBirney went to the "Outlook" and fastened an old sheet in the crotch of the tulip trees, and there being a fine breeze blowing across the flank of the mountain, it caught the folds of this copious flag and spread it to the breeze.

"Azalea will be the first to see it, likely," thought Mrs. McBirney. "She has such sharp eyes."

But the sharp eyes of Azalea were busy, at that moment, staring disconsolately from the car window, many miles from home. For there was a freight wreck not far ahead of them, and, according to the conductor, there was no telling when they could move on.

It was quite possible for Mary McBirney to hear the roar of the approaching train from her high-swung home-nest, although the railroad

lay across the valley from them, but Jim had come home from school and heard all the story, and he and Hi had sat on the bench and nearly stared their eyes out watching for the locomotive to push its black nose over the gap, and supper had been eaten, and the darkness settled down for the night, before the shrill and apologetic whistle of the engine was heard.

"That child will be clean starved," ma said to the boys. "And pa, too, unless he had the sense to go to the inn and get supper. And I don't suppose he did, me not being along. Seems like married men didn't know enough to eat unless their wives was by to tell 'em when to do it."

Not that Ma McBirney was scolding. She was merely passing the time.

"I reckon we'd best take that there sheet in, ma, and swing out the lantern," Jim said as he heard the distant shriek of the train.

"It sure will cheer them up to see it," ma said. "It's all ready for use, Jim. I filled it and polished it yesterday."

So Jim climbed up the tulip tree to the first long, out-reaching branch, and swung out a serviceable headlight lantern.

"There!" said Jim descending, "It looks like the morning star."

And so it did to the homesick eyes of the girl who sat snuggled close to Pa McBirney, sitting all starched and prim, in the pink gingham frock of little Barbara Summers.

"What's that, please?" she cried, nudging pa's arm. "That away up on the mountain? That's not a star, is it? It's too low down."

"Sho!" ejaculated pa, "that's ma's lantern. She's telling us to hurry up. You hear, you there?" he called good-naturedly to the horses.

"Perhaps the boys will come down to meet us."

"No they won't, Azalea. At least, Jim won't. He'll stay with his ma. As much as we can, Azalea, we-all must stay with ma. It ain't good for her to be alone too much. I've been talking that over with Jim and he thinks just like I do. She's had too much trouble, ma has, to be left alone to brood over them. Not that she's a fretting one. But she's deep, ma is."

"I know."

"It just seemed like her heart would break when you was took away, Azalea. She sets great store by you — almost as much as she did

by Molly. You see, she's turned the love she had for Molly, right on you. So you be good to her, sister, won't you now?"

"Oh, indeed I will! Just as good as I know how."

"You're a bright girl, Zalie, and I feel it in my bones that there's fine things in store for you. But I'm going to say right now, that if you can, I want you to stick to ma. If you *can*, Azalea. Of course I don't want you to stand in your own light."

The girl slipped a hand into the arm of Pa McBirney. Then she pointed up the valley to where the light shone from the "Outlook."

"That's my light, pa," she said softly.

Haystack Thompson, who had stayed in town for the night, putting up at the inn and intending to return to his neglected farm in the morning, had given Mr. McBirney an account of Azalea's adventures, but now pa begged to hear them again from the girl's lips. So she told him everything in her sweet wistful voice.

"It seems like I'm a dreadful lot of trouble to you," she said. "I can't see why it is that I had to bring you all this worry."

"Why tain't your fault, Zalie. What's the use of talking like that?"

"It seems like I'm not the way other girls are. I've had such a strange life, Pa McBirney."

"Well it hain't been very long yet, girl — hardly long enough to be strange, you might say."

"Yes it has, pa. It's been short and strange. Now really, you know, I ought to be living in The Shoals. That's my house — at least, I mean it might have been. That old Colonel Atherton you told Jim about, and that he told me about, was my grandfather."

She said it in a musing way, as if she attached very little importance to it, and her hand still rested on the arm of Pa McBirney.

"What's that!" roared pa. "What you saying, girl? Whoa there, Mac. Whoa Nannie," He brought the horses to such a short stop that the stones crashed away from hoofs and wheels down the steep grade of the road. "Just say that again, will ye?"

"I found it out while I was away, pa. Betty Bowen told me. She said mamma never wanted to come down this way, so near her old home, until just at the last, when she knew she couldn't

live. But it don't matter, pa. You don't think any less of me for being the granddaughter of that man, do you? I can't help being related to him anyway."

"Sho!" exclaimed pa. "What you talking about, girl? He may have been a foolish man in the heat of all the trouble of the war, and done things that hadn't ought to have been done, but he was quality, Azalea. They was great folks, the Athertons."

"Well, the only ones I know anything about," said Azalea with a choke in her voice, "were wandering show folks; and one of them was a friendless orphan, Pa McBirney, till you and ma took her in. There wasn't any great folks about her. There was just a miserable little wretch. Don't change toward me, pa, please, please! Don't go and tell Jim and Hi. Maybe they'd think I was putting on airs. Just let everything go on the way it is."

"Nothing ever goes on the way it was," said pa profoundly, clucking to his horses. "But I see what you mean, girl, and since you and me is pretty good friends, I'll do what you want me to do. I'll stand by you because we are friends."

He felt the girl's grateful lips pressed against

the rough sleeve of his coat, and he laughed down at her in a kindly, almost pitying way.

"See here, Zalie," he said, "don't you get to caring too much for us. Don't you get to caring too much for nothing. You hear me? Keep calm, Zalie. Keep calm. Folks that cares too much gets in a lot of trouble."

"Do they?" laughed the girl. The remark seemed to strike her as very funny, and her gay laughter rang out like silver bells on the night air. The horses quickened their steps as they heard it, and a discouraged looking old "houn'-dog" came out from a tumble-down cabin and bayed at them.

But Pa McBirney refused to be amused.

"I mean what I say," he declared.

Azalea pulled herself together and stopped laughing.

"I know I'm silly, pa, but I'm so happy! You can't think how happy I am! There now, don't you try to tell me not to be too happy, because I've simply *got* to be happy to-night. Now, I'll be good and talk like a sensible person all the rest of the ride. I want to tell you more about Mr. Summers, and my cousin Barbara."

"Your cousin Barbara?"

"Yes, Mrs. Summers, you know. She's so little she seems almost like a girl. And we made up our minds to be kin."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yes. We're going to write to each other just like we were cousins. See?"

"Eh-huh."

"I just love her!"

"There you go again."

"Well, I can't help it if I do. Tell me about Carin, pa."

"I reckon she'll be up to see you to-morrow to tell you everything herself. She's going into some kind of picture making, and her pa and ma is simply rooting up the earth, doing things." He told her about the project for developing the mountain industries and the part they all were to play in it.

"Something laid out for every last one of us, you see."

"Except me, pa. Didn't they make plans for me?"

"They didn't mention any, but I suspicion that they've got more plans for you than for anybody else. And that makes me feel kind

o' bothered, on ma's account. Now that you tell me about your being the granddaughter of old Colonel Atherton, with a sort of right to live in the great house — though it did pass out of the family years ago — I'm more bothered than ever."

Azalea laughed again.

"I don't believe you're bothered at all, pa," she declared. "Why, here we are, home! Why, we're really home! Didn't the time pass quickly? Ma! Ma! Hullo, boys! Where's ma?"

Mary McBirney folded the slight form of the girl in her arms.

"My prayers was answered," she said simply. "Just bear witness, children. They was all answered. It's a lesson to us, ain't it? If we want anything of the Lord, just ask him, believing. Are you clean starved out, pet? Come right along in and have supper. Pa, the boys will put up the horses. You hike in the house and eat something decent. I suppose you had some kind of stuff down at that there inn. My land, it's a wonder to me them folks can't learn how to cook."

She led the girl in and seated her before the

table with its fine bread, its glasses of foaming milk, its cottage cheese and honey. Then she pushed her husband to his seat, and hung over him, then fluttered to Azalea to hang over her like an anxious mother bird.

“Here’s a little hot ham to help quell your appetites. And here’s some hominy cakes. My goodness, Azalea, do eat something. Pa, you just ruined your appetite down there in that miserable eating place. Ain’t it wonderful to have Zalie home again, pa? The ways of the Lord are past our comprehending. You must tell me everything, Zalie — every last thing.”

The lights from the homemade candles fluttered softly against the brown walls. Far off, the whippoorwills called. The chill freshness of the night-enshrouded mountain stole in the door, and when the boys had returned from putting up the horses, the family shut out the silent, shadowy world about them and drew around the table. Their faces, earnest, eager, loving, came into the full light from the candle dips. And there, far into the night, Azalea talked to them, secure in her sense of love and peace.

Afterward, when they all had lighted her to her chamber, and then had left her, she stood

for a while on her little gallery listening to the whippoorwills and looking at the low stars. It seemed as if messages of good will came from the birds, from the near dark forest, from the loud-singing stream. All was familiar and dear. And her fragrant chamber welcomed her with the silent sweetness to be found only in well-loved rooms.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SACRIFICE

Among the wide acres of the Atherton place was a certain field known since the memory of the grandfathers as "The Field of Arrows." It was a level, sunny spot, surrounded by low hills. It backed, indeed, against a hill, and a little stream with mirror-like pools ran around it with scythelike grace. The Field of Arrows was almost a semicircle, and it was as pleasant a spot as any around about Lee, beautiful though that region was.

It had taken its name from the great number of flint arrowheads, the handicraft of the Cherokees or of some earlier race, who had camped or fought in that spot. Perhaps they had raised their maize there too. At any rate, the good Indian corn was growing there now, putting up its bladelike leaves courageously to the young summer air. Midway of the field, that is to say, reaching from the center of its base and running to the highest point of its circle, a fine broad

pathway stretched, and beside this path poppies and daisies, mint and mountain pinks had leave to grow when their hour should come. The path led from the stepping stones and the shady cove where the kettles and tubs stood for washing, to a cabin with two picturesque outside chimneys made of the field stone and the reliable red clay, which held them together with brave determination. A light gallery ran in front of the house, with benches made of stout ash, pushed back against the wall, and that best of drinking cups, a long-handled, polished gourd, hung on the wall above an old Indian water jar, hollowed from soapstone.

Within were four rooms of equal size, and back of the house was a summer kitchen. And everything about the place, from the latticed passageway that led to the kitchen, to the serviceable crane that swung in the chief fireplace, spoke of home and comfort. The little windows looked out on a prosperous scene; the mulberry tree, with its golden bark, had places of hiding and nestling for half a dozen children. The boulders in the stream sheltered ideal swimming holes. The chestnut and butternut trees on the

hill behind the house suggested happy autumn days.

"It will be a perfect place for children," decided Mrs. Carson. "And that's where Hi's family shall live."

She had taken him to see it, and he had looked at it with eyes which seemed to recognize it as a home returned to, rather than as one just found.

So, while he and Mr. Carson took their three days' journey to Hi's home, Mrs. Carson busied herself with the cabin. The lattice was freshly whitewashed; the fireplaces within the house and the chimneys that ran up visibly to the ceiling, were painted a dark red. The floors and walls were purified, and the whole place furnished with new, strong mountain furniture. Rag rugs were put on the floor, fresh curtains at the windows, a good stove set up in the kitchen, the comfortable beds were provided with new bedding, and a fine little old clock, taken from the attic of The Shoals, and a mirror from the same place, in its antique frame, were set in place.

"Tell your mother to come right along," Mrs. Carson had warned Hi. "If she has any particular treasure she wishes to bring, well and

good. But she's not to bother about anything else. She'll be glad to have new things to look at. Women get dreadfully tired looking at the same furniture day in and day out. I believe a new outfit for the house at the right time would have kept many a woman from going insane."

"Yessum," agreed Jim. "Going over and over a thing is what wears you out, ain't it?"

Mrs. Carson had held some doubts as to the ability of her husband and Hi to persuade a woman to "pull up stakes" at an hour's notice and to go to a place she perhaps had never heard of. But it appeared that Mrs. Kitchell, like her son, was ready for adventure. Asking no more time than it took to wash and iron the handful of clothes possessed by the family, she packed all her worldly goods — or at least, all she cared to retain — in an old haircloth trunk, and smiling and expectant, turned her face toward Lee. It was a little brown, nutlike face, much like Hi's, and it was really carved in smiles in spite of all her troubles. There were worried marks between her brows, it is true, but the laughing marks about her eyes and the corners of her mouth, discounted them.

The democrat wagon from The Shoals was

at the station to meet the party, and Mrs. Carson, who had driven down in her little pony cart, helped to get the family settled in it. The little hair trunk was put in behind, and the tribe of Kitchell, with a new light in their bright black eyes, turned to the future.

"A dear little strong, staunch woman, isn't she?" said Lucy Carson to her husband as they drove toward their home. "And the two girls are as nice little daughters as anyone would care to have — much better looking than Hi. But the fourth child, the little boy, looks sickly. We'll have to put him on special diet — plenty of milk and eggs."

Mr. Carson smiled happily to himself. The languor was going out of his wife's voice; the pallor of her face was flushed with a lovely rose pink. As she sat beside him, in her soft cream-colored frock, with her lilac scarf drifting from her shoulders, her pale amethysts in their setting of old yellow gold clasping collar and belt, he thought her the sweetest woman he ever had seen. She was sweeter even than before sorrow had come to her. He had loved her then; but there was something very like worship in the feeling he had toward her now.

"We'll drive on through the hills the short way," she said, brimful and flowing over with the home-romance of the Kitchells, "and be at the door to welcome them."

And so they were. As the democrat wagon drew up, filled with the wondering and somewhat awed Kitchells, their good "neighbors" — they would not have tolerated the word "benefactors" — stood at the door of the cabin to meet them. And tired little Anne Kitchell, her four children following her, stepped into the door of her new home. The old life with the shame of a drunken husband, killed in a shameful row, was left behind. She had the chance to begin a new life, and to this feeling the new furniture of the house contributed more than she could realize.

Hi ran from room to room, staring, his big mouth open, his heart swelling. Once he waved his long arms over his head, unable to contain himself, and not wanting to really whoop with delight. He listened while Mrs. Carson talked to his mother of this and that; showed her the kitchen and the store closets, with their supplies of food and of house linen, and the plain, good wardrobes she had prepared for the family.

“If I’ve made any mistakes, Mrs. Kitchell, the things can be changed. I worked according to Hi’s direction. No, you’re not to thank me. Not at all. This is a sort of bonus offered you for your being so obliging in coming to us in our need. We want to get our factory started as soon as possible, and we couldn’t spare you the time to sew for your family.”

She spoke in a brisk bright way new to her, and even Hi, boy that he was, could see that a great change was coming over her. She had reminded him of a tall white lily, drooping at the close of a hot day; but now she was like that same lily in the morning, and her petals were touched with pink.

So Anne Kitchell was not allowed to weep out her gratitude, though a dozen times she thought she was going to; she was filled, instead, with a new desire to work and to “be somebody.” There was no one here to saddle the old shameful stories on her — to refer to her as a drunkard’s wife. She would be taken at her own valuation, and in her keen, quick little brain she began to understand that the valuation might be a high one if she chose to make it so.

Mary McBirney gave her only a day or two

to settle herself in her new home, and then, with a pail of mountain honey and a crock of cottage cheese by way of gifts, she came to see her. They liked each other at once, though the life of one had enabled her to make the best of herself, and the life of the other had kept her fighting like an angry rat. But the honesty that underlay the character of each, and the interest each had in Hi, and in Azalea — indeed, in children in general — helped them over the little strangeness they might have felt.

But Ma McBirney was restless. There was something on her conscience — something that had been there ever since her husband had told her that Azalea was the granddaughter of old Colonel Atherton, and that, if fortune had treated her kindly, The Shoals, and all the comforts and opportunities that went with the possession of the estate, would have been hers. True, the fine place had passed legitimately into the hands of the Carsons; yet knowing the generous and abounding nature of the Carsons as she did, she realized that were they to be told the truth about Azalea, they would at once offer her a home, and would give her an education such as their own daughter was receiving.

"I'm a wicked woman," said Mary McBirney to herself. "I'm selfish and sinful. Just to give myself happiness, I'm keeping that dear child away from what belongs to her."

The thought had goaded her for days. More, it had crept into the wakeful hours of the night. It had tortured her as she watched Azalea busy about the house, singing, or thinking in her intense, curious way. When the girl flung her arms about Ma McBirney's neck, calling her the sweetest thing in the world, and saying how happy she was to be back with her again, it seemed as if Ma McBirney's heart actually turned over in her side, with dread of losing her, and with shame at her own cowardice.

So, on the day she called on Mrs. Kitchell, she summoned her better angel — though it was difficult to imagine that Mary McBirney could be surrounded with anything but good angels — and made her way to The Shoals.

From every window of the great white house fluttered orange and white awnings. The lawn was trim and green; the flower beds aglow with lovely fresh blooms. Hammocks and couches swung on the wide gallery, and linen-covered chairs and great East Indian jugs filled with

growing plants, stood about. Ma McBirney paused before the wide door with its fan-shaped transom and looked about her wistfully. By saying a word, Azalea could leave the humble little home which was now hers, and come down to enjoy the bright hospitality of this beautiful place. Music, books, travel—all of these things would come to her. Mary McBirney remembered how she herself had longed for opportunity in those early days when she first became aware of her ignorance, and how she had “given up” and gone her quiet way—the way to which she was born. But Azalea was not like that. She could not be happy in giving up an education and all that would go to make her capable and able to measure herself with the best. What had meant contentment for her, Mary McBirney, would mean failure for Azalea.

She turned these matters over in her large, kind mind, and—rang Mrs. Carson’s doorbell.

Mrs. Carson’s parlor maid, black, smiling, and chubby, answered the summons.

“Tulula Darthula,” said Mrs. McBirney in her soft voice, “might I see your mistress?”

"I'll inquiah, ma'am," replied Tulula in even softer tones. "Be pleased to enteh."

Mrs. McBirney would have been quite content to sit on the porch, but the thoughts surging in her brain impelled her to accept Tulula's invitation.

"Will you be seated in the mornin' room, ma'am?"

Mrs. McBirney hesitated a moment. Then she said shyly:

"If you don't think Mrs. Carson would mind, Tulula, I'd like to sit in the drawing room this time."

"Why ce't'ney, ma'am. Suit yo'sef."

Tulula rustled away with her message, and Mary McBirney, who all her life had seen only the mountain or the village homes, entered the long shadowy drawing room, with its paintings, its occasional white statue, its shining floor and carved furniture, and sitting there, measuring all this meant of knowledge and delight, steeled her heart for the sacrifice.

Then Mr. and Mrs. Carson entered together, and upborn by love, Mrs. McBirney went to meet them, saying:

"I asked to come in here for — for a reason. I hope you don't mind, ma'am."

"Our home is for our friends," answered Mrs. Carson gently. "I would like to see you here often, friend."

She knew, somehow, that Mary McBirney had a great thing to say. —

"This is the reason:" said Mrs. McBirney. And then she told them the whole story.

* * * * *

It had been rainy Sunday. The rain began before daylight; it wiped out the sunrise, and it turned what should have been a golden mid-summer day into mere blankness and desolation. At least, a person could look at it that way if he wanted to.

Up at the McBirney house no one had thought of dressing for church.

"No one but a fish could get anywhere to-day," said Jim.

"I feel just as if we were living under a waterfall," declared Azalea. "What'll we do to-day, Jim?"

"I don't know — 'less you tell me stories."

"Piggy, I don't want to do all the thinking. If I tell stories you've got to tell them too. It's

nice we're going to have chicken for dinner, isn't it?" She sniffed the air contentedly.

"You bet it is. And strawberries and 'lasses cake!"

"I wonder what Carin's doing, Jim?"

"Fooling 'round in that there studio of hern. My, but she can paint, can't she? Did you see that picture she done of me sitting up in the willer?"

"Jim McBirney, what makes you talk like that? You know better than to say 'done' for 'did' and you know willow isn't pronounced 'willer.'"

"Now, look here, Zalie, you leave me alone and let me talk like I want to. I ain't got on my Sunday clothes, have I? Well then, I don't have to put on Sunday talk. Just let me feel comfortable, can't you?"

"I wish Carin were up here to-day."

"And Hi. I'd rather have Hi. Carin makes me kind o' squirm. She's a mighty nice girl, but she don't make me feel to home."

"Oh, Jim, she's lovely. And such fun too! She can get up the best plays you ever heard of."

"Girl plays, I reckon. She couldn't think of anything that would interest boys."

"Maybe boys wouldn't have the sense to be interested, smarty."

"Children," broke in the soft voice of Ma McBirney, "I've got the dinner in the oven and there ain't nothing occupying me just at present. Wouldn't one of you read me a story from them *Youth's Companions* Carin sent home by pa last night? Seems as if it would pass the time."

The children flushed a little. They knew when ma disliked their way of talking. She had her own particular fashion of correcting them.

"You read, Azalea," said Jim, sinking into a chair and staring out of the rain-beaten window. "And you'll have to read good and loud to get ahead of this belling and roaring."

And, indeed, the wind shook the cabin, and the rain fluttered down the chimney; the stream that tumbled down the mountain side was fairly shouting and the trees were beating their drenched branches together with a sound like the rushing of great birds. But high above the elemental din, Azalea's clear voice arose. And peace dwelt within the cabin. It dwelt there

while the children set the table for the good dinner that Mrs. McBirney had cooked, and while they devoured that dinner with perfect concentration of purpose. And afterward, when ma had read a psalm to them, and pa had told a story about something that happened to him when he was a boy and the fires were raging over the mountains, they settled down to a quiet game of jack straws on the deal table.

And then, just as they were on the point of being bored again, the storm cleared. Above them the deep blue sky shone through the fleecy whiteness of the clouds, and beneath them torn fragments of cloud swam along like floating islands over the purple valley. The sunset came in rose and gold, and in the east a proud young moon, bright as a happy bride, swam up into the heavens.

The McBirneys, silent and happy, cloaked against the dampness, sat at "Outlook Point" and looked about them at the beautiful world.

"This is as good as church, to my way of thinking," remarked Thomas McBirney. "If you can't worship the Almighty when you see a thing like this, then there ain't no manner of worship in you."

"What's that, Thomas? Singing?" asked his wife.

Something sweet and clear troubled the silence, and as the four harkened it swelled.

"Singing!" decided Thomas. "Who can it be?"

They listened.

"I know," cried Azalea gayly. "It's the Carsons! Oh, ma, it's Carin and her father and mother."

Something gripped Mary McBirney's loving, jealous heart. She knew why they were coming. She had asked them to come for this very thing, but when the rain had set in, it had seemed like an answer to her secret prayers — those prayers which she would not admit to herself that she prayed, and which were no more than her "heart's sincere desire."

The horses drew nearer; the words of the song could be heard.

"Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh —"

The three voices, softly blended, sang the familiar lines to the slow motion of their horses.

Azalea ran to the edge of the "Outlook" and sent her clear voice, rested and refreshed from the strain it had undergone in the days of her enforced singing of noisy songs, ringing down the mountain side.

"Shadows of the evening,
Steal across the sky."

The tightness at Ma McBirney's heart increased. How like her Azalea was to these others — like them in voice and manner, and unafraid of them! They had heard her, for Mr. Carson interrupted himself to call out to her. Then the song went on, and there were four singing it.

"Jesus give the weary
Calm and sweet repose;
With Thy tenderest blessing,
May our eyelids close."

Now the sounds grew fainter as the windings of the road took them away; then they swelled again, as the horses returned on the winding road. But Azalea sang on, delighting in the

song her mother had taught her — the song that had comforted her when she had grown sick at heart at all the silly things she had been obliged to sing when she was “the show girl.”

“Grant to little children,
Visions bright of Thee;
Guard the sailors tossing
On the deep, blue sea.”

“They are here,” said Ma McBirney in so solemn a voice that Jim and Azalea stared at her, wondering.

And so they were. They dismounted easily, threw their bridles, Western fashion, over the heads of their horses, and walked forward with pleasant greetings. But even their voices were different. They too seemed solemn.

“It must be the night,” thought Azalea. She took Carin’s hand, and they all walked back to the Point, and sat there watching the little islands of cloud as they floated across the path of the moon and turned from cloud into something precious and radiant, not quite so pale as silver nor as bright as gold.

CHAPTER XV

AZALEA CHOOSES

"We might be eagles—or angels," murmured Mrs. Carson, sinking into her seat.

"We couldn't stand it in the house any longer," Carin explained. "We made up our minds we'd have a ride even if the roads were bad."

"The ford must have been pretty deep," remarked Pa McBirney.

"I took the leading straps of the horses the ladies were riding, and we made a rush for it together," Mr. Carson explained.

Then silence fell. There certainly was something strange about the night.

"We had other reasons for coming up here to-night," Mr. Carson said at last. "We came because we knew that we could sit out here with you all, and that we could all look at this wonderful scene, and forget all about our bodies, and our troubles, and our little human way of looking at things. We could be, as my wife

said, like eagles, or like angels. We could realize that we really were spirits."

It was Ma McBirney who murmured:
"Yes."

"We came," went on Mr. Carson gently, "to ask Azalea to make a choice. We are going to invite her to live with us and to be as our own daughter. She will share equally with Carin in everything; at least as far as it is possible for us to make an equal division. We know the story of her life and that under more fortunate circumstances the home we live in would have been hers. She would have been educated in the best manner and fitted for the life of a lady of position. Now, of our four children only one is left. So we offer her a share of our hearts and our substance. Do you understand, Azalea?"

Carin threw an arm about Azalea's waist.

"Oh, say yes, dear. We will be so happy."

"We will make you welcome from our heart of hearts," said Mrs. Carson. But it seemed as if she were holding something back; and Azalea saw her white hand laid upon Ma McBirney's arms.

The moon had gone under a dense cloud, and they were left in the bland, moist darkness. And

in that darkness there gleamed before Azalea's mental gaze, the two homes — the great, beautiful manor, and the mountain cabin. She knew little of the life in the former, but what she did know of it came to her now with all its ease, its pleasure, and its promise. She thought of the struggle there in the mountain home; of the sacrifice, the hard work, the eternal "doing without." Then, as if something above and beyond her came to her to lift her out of herself, she glimpsed the kind wishes and helpful affection of those in the manor; and over against them she placed the tense and tender love of Mary McBirney who had clasped her to her heart when she was motherless.

They did not need her at the manor; but she was greatly needed in the cabin. Love demanded tribute of her. And suddenly, Azalea knew what she must do. If Ma McBirney loved her like a mother, she, Azalea, gave back a daughter's love. There was, after all, nothing worth thinking of save that — save love. A warm glow swept over her, and the deepest sense of contentment she ever had known in all her restless, curious life of change filled her heart.

"I've thought of everything," she said.

"And I thank you, thank you, thank you — you dears!" She turned toward the Carsons, and they could see that she was holding out her hands in the gloom. "But this is my home. Ma McBirney is dearer to me than any one now on the earth. I'll stay with her — if she wants me."

And then she suddenly remembered that Mrs. McBirney had not said a word to oppose Mr. Carson's arguments. Could it be, that because of their poverty, they *wished* her to go to The Shoals? Little cold tremors ran over her, and her heart turned sick.

"But, ma, do you want me?" she cried with sharp agony.

"Want you!" sobbed ma, holding out her arms. "Want you, honey bird?"

The moon swam out again into the clear sky, transfiguring their world. A mocking bird began to sing, whistling low, muffled notes of sad sweetness.

"It is the word of truth you have spoken, Azalea," said Mr. Carson slowly, "and I thank you for your honesty, and for your nobility too, my dear. We understand everything; don't we Lucy, my love?"

"Everything," replied Mrs. Carson.

"But now we have something to say which is not a request, but practically a command. Next week Miss Parkhurst, a friend of mine and a teacher of unusual ability, is coming to instruct Carin. You are to come daily, Azalea, to share her lessons with her. And that the going and coming may not be too much for you, we are sending a well-trained little horse to you. Its feed and keep shall be, so far as possible, the care of my stable boys, so that my good friend McBirney, who is so willing to take other people's burdens on him, may not have another one added. But I promise you all, for myself and for Mrs. Carson and Carin, that you shall be thought of, Azalea, as the daughter of this home here on the mountains. And while we shall give you all you will take in the way of schooling and development, we will not do one thing to win you away from the life you have chosen."

"Thank you, sir," murmured Azalea. She could say no more.

"Oh, thank you," added Ma McBirney, crushing down the tormenting little doubts that would arise in her heart. Could she really keep this scarlet tanager in her wren's nest?

But no doubts troubled the others. Jim sat thinking and thinking. What wonderful things came to Zalie! And he — he was a gawk — a dunce — a silly hill billy! He wondered Azalea paid any attention to him! And yet, somehow, she seemed to think of herself as his sister. Well, then, he'd stick by her, sir, no matter what happened. Till he was an old man with long white whiskers he'd stick by her, and if anyone did her any sort of harm, he'd fix him. He almost leaped to his feet and stood there straight and fierce with his own combat, beside the girl.

"I forgot to say," observed Mr. Carson in his slow way, "that there will be two little horses. They were a pair and the man didn't want to sell them singly. So the second one is for Jim."

"No!" cried Jim, and his voice sounded almost defiant in his excitement.

"Yes!" cried Mr. Carson, mocking him. "Shake hands on it." And he wrung Jim's hand in his own. Then the boy's shyness came on him and made him slip away in the darkness. Yet he was on hand to hold the horses when the Carsons were ready to mount.

They rode away in the moonlight, with the bewitching world of cloud and shine about them.



He stood there, straight and fierce.

The trees were transformed into enchanted silver things amid which elves and dryads seemed to hide; the rushing water was a torrent of dancing crystal where the water maidens played. The three who rode away, went singing. But this time it was a song that Azalea did not know. She said so to Ma McBirney with a troubled smile.

"What a lovely, lovely song! And I never so much as heard it before."

Ma McBirney kissed her slowly, and said with meaning:

"But you see, Zalie, they are going to teach it to you."

Azalea did not answer. She lighted her candle.

"'Night, Jim," she called. "You couldn't get rid of me, could you?"

"Could if I tried. Didn't try."

"Good night, Pa McBirney."

"Good night, daughter." It was the first time he ever had called her that. She slipped over and bending above him, dropped a kiss on his brow as he sat there in the open room—the queer two-sided chamber that divided the closed rooms of the house.

"I reckon I'd better go to your room with you," said Ma McBirney, "and see you safe."

So together they climbed the rude stairs to that cotelike chamber that looked out on the transfigured mountain. All about them, save for the throating of the mocking bird, was silence. And in silence the two parted for the night. They had no need of words. Stronger than any mere accident of relationship was the love and trust in their hearts.

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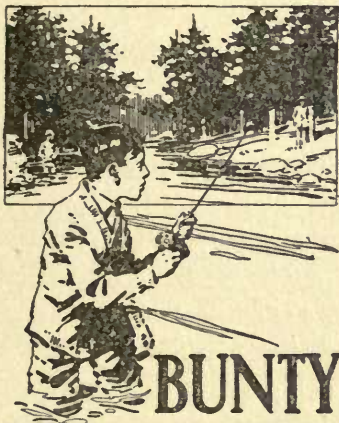
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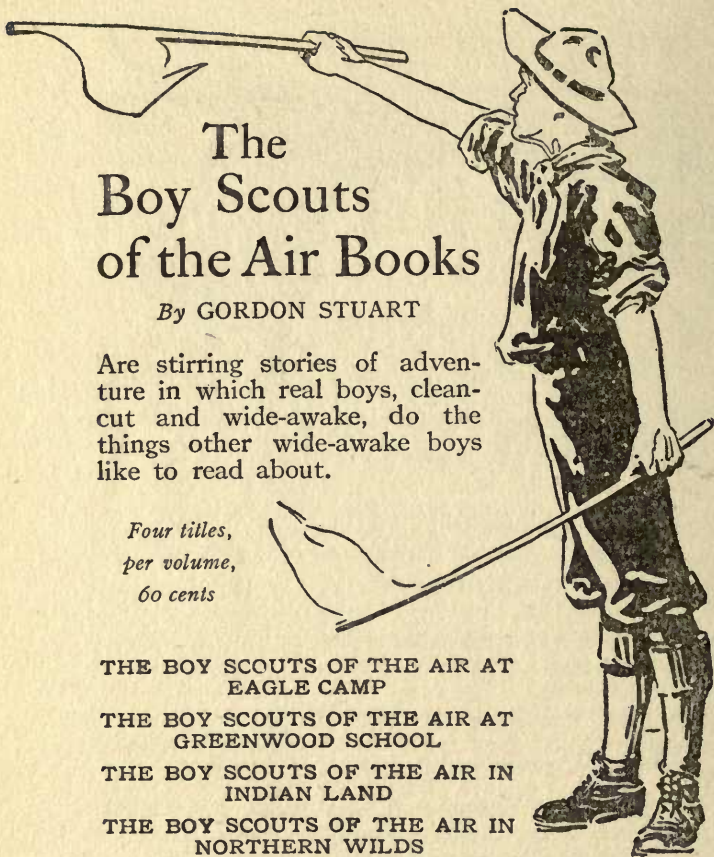
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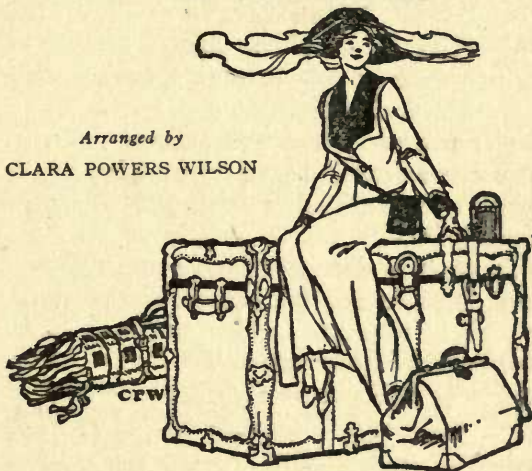
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